University of Alberta

The Indeterminacy of Poetics: Six Experimental Poets

by

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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

in English

Department of English and Film Studies

Edmonton, Alberta
Fall 2005

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395, rue Wellington
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4
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0-494-08752-8

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for Kelly and for my family

Abstract

In the prose poem that opens *Alley Alley Home Free*, Fred Wah states that "No single meaning is the right one because no 'right ones' stand still long enough to get caught" (5). However, critics who deal with formally experimental poetry often attempt to catch that single meaning, a practice which at best partially undoes the text's goals and at worst completely undermines them. The six texts I deal with in this dissertation—John Cage's "Writing for the Second Time Through *Finnegans Wake*," Robert Duncan's "Passages," Steve McCaffery's *Carnival: The Second Panel*, Erin Mouré's *Pillage Laud*, Harryette Mullen's *Muse & Drudge*, and Fred Wah's "Music at the Heart of Thinking"—all challenge the notion of singular meaning and offer instead semantic indeterminacy. It is difficult, if not impossible, to truly determine what these texts *mean*. This dissertation represents an attempt to work through the problems, challenges, and possibilities of semantically indeterminate poetry without closing down the range of possible meanings that each text contains. Consequently, the dissertation works in small, disconnected thoughts, in a form similar to a reading diary, in order to avoid offering any singular, overarching interpretations of the texts. All of the entries in the dissertation are dated in order to draw attention to the process of interpretation; entries may intentionally or unintentionally disagree with each other, or might strike off in a completely new direction, depending on how the I encountered the text on any given day. My goal is to critically engage with the texts in such a way that I can point out as many different (and sometimes differing) meanings and interpretations in each text, thus implicitly working against the tradition of explicating formally experimental texts that critics often uphold.

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to my supervisor, Doug Barbour, for his support, encouragement, and trust in me and this project; it is not an exaggeration to say that without his friendship and guidance, I would never have completed this degree. I also owe a large debt of gratitude to Mike O'Driscoll and Bert Almon, the other members of my supervisory committee, for their many acts of kindness over the years. I cannot imagine a more amiable or more dedicated trio of professors with which to work.

Garrett Epp played a crucial role as graduate chair in helping to move my project along just when it seemed to have irrevocably stalled; his intervention was extremely kind and utterly helpful.

I have made a number of great friends during my time at the University of Alberta, all of whom proved much needed support and good humour. Mike Epp, Monica Flegel, Jan Olesen, Tom Penner, and Gaby Zezulka-Mailloux all helped to keep me relatively sane and properly pickled throughout the years. In particular, Adam Dickinson provided me with hours of lively and challenging discussion about poetry, poetics, and life in general, which were enlightening and entertaining.

My family provided me with an amazing amount of support of the long journey that has been my life as a university student. I hope I have made them aware just I much I appreciate it.

Finally, meeting Kelly Laycock has been, by far and away, the best aspect and greatest reward of my years as a doctoral student. Her love, friendship, intelligence, and sassy sex appeal continue to amaze me. I am grateful for everything she has done to support me, but, most of all, I am just grateful for her.

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Introduction

1. The Project

This dissertation probably requires an explanation of its form; basically, it is a series of unconnected thoughts on six texts of indeterminate poetry: John Cage's "Writing for the Second Time Through *Finnegans Wake*," Robert Duncan's *Passages*, Steve McCaffery's *Carnival: The Second Panel*, Erin Mouré's *Pillage Laud*, Harryette Mullen's *Muse & Drudge*, and Fred Wah's "Music at the Heart of Thinking." I used the unconnected/disconnected form in order to investigate these texts without developing or following a thesis; it is my belief that to read these texts through the lens of a directed, linear, thetic argument fundamentally undercuts the intentionally difficult and openly challenging ways of knowing that the texts present the reader.

The thoughts presented in each chapter are not, however, completely unconnected. All the thoughts share two obvious points of intersection: they all deal with the same text, and they all flow through me. In that sense, the texts under consideration and my thoughts are the connective tissue holding the dissertation together. However, this connective tissue is as intentionally thin as I can make it; moreover, since the reader doesn't have access to my inner thoughts, and since I withhold most of the connections I see between each entry, the reader can decide for herself how the entries may or may not connect through me. The result is that the readers of the dissertation must either try to create these connections in their own minds or else abandon the need for such connections; either way is perfectly fine with me.

I intend the dissertation to provoke a style of reading that is too rarely encountered in academic writing. A passive reading of this dissertation will likely leave the reader at least somewhat unsatisfied and quite possibly completely annoyed. However, an active reading, in which the reader is actively trying to seek out connections or disconnections between entries, will, I hope, prove more enlightening. The dissertation's form will ideally create a style of active reading that mirrors the active reading needed to encounter the indeterminate texts I am writing on. In this sense, I see this dissertation as being a writerly text, a term first used by Roland Barthes and defined for my purposes by Steve McCaffery:

> Barthes… distinguishes two fundamental types of texts: the readerly (*lisible*) and the writerly (*scriptable*). The readerly is the classic text, grounded in a transmission theory of communication and in an ideology of exchange…. The writerly text by contrast is resistant to habitual reading; it is "the novelistic without the novel, poetry without the poem… production without product" making the reader no longer a consumer but a producer of the text. ("Language Writing" 143)

This writerly aspect is intricately linked with the entry form of the dissertation. Many (if not most) of the individual entries are rather readerly: they put forward an idea about the particular text, offer evidence and analysis, and even offer some summation; the reader can often remain passive while reading a particular entry. Each entry, in fact, might even have an implied thesis, and, as such, the entries are often quite conventional small academic essays. However, as a whole, the project takes on a writerly form because of the missing connective tissue between the entries; there is no logical progression in each chapter, nor is there any overarching argument that the entries work toward; in fact, the chapters are non-linear and non-hierarchical in nature, since entries don't build toward larger points outside themselves. Moreover, some entries in the same chapter will openly repeat or even contradict each other. All these aspects (which are rarely intentional in conventional academic essays) are actually integral to the form of my project. Just as readers must learn for themselves how to read the indeterminate poems I deal with, so they are meant to learn how to read this dissertation. In line with McCaffery's explanation, the reader must learn how to become an active producer of this text.[1]

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[1] **April 18, 2005**

John Fiske's notion of the producerly text is another way of describing my intent with my dissertation. Fiske argues that a producerly text is

> a text whose writerly reading is not necessarily difficult, that [it] does not challenge the reader to make sense out of it, [and it] does not faze the reader with its sense of shocking difference both from other texts and from the everyday. It does not impose laws of its own construction that readers have to decipher in order to read it on terms of its, rather than their, choosing. The producerly text has the accessibility of a readerly one, and can theoretically be read in that easy way by those of its readers who are comfortably accommodated within the dominant ideology…, but it also has the openness of the writerly. The difference is that it does not require this writerly activity,

A less theoretical way of looking at this way of reading is to focus on the importance of the resonances between individual entries. Since the entries share two points of intersection, it is impossible that they would completely avoid ideas that have resonances with other entries. In fact, these resonances are what the writerly text requires, since it is the resonances between entries (in the case of this project) that the readers must actively supply themselves. Since the resonances are at best a trace in the text, there is no way for the readers to know for certain if the resonances they supply are those that I had in mind when writing, and it is this uncertainty that allows the readers to disregard the notion of finding the *correct* resonances.

The distinction between accuracy and appropriateness also lies at the centre of this project, specifically in terms of interpretation. The search by readers and critics for the accurate interpretation of an indeterminate text is extremely limiting, since accuracy carries with it the notion of correctness. The accurate/correct interpretation almost by necessity claims as its right the title of being the most correct (or even the only correct) interpretation. When dealing with texts such as the six I deal with, the drive to determine the accurate interpretation is also a drive to limit the indeterminacy of the text; it is a drive to master or control a text that desires to avoid such critical power plays. Instead of the accurate interpretation, I am concerned in this project with offering appropriate interpretations, where *appropriate* carries with it connotations of possible readings. The appropriate interpretation exists as one among many other appropriate interpretations; consequently, an appropriate interpretation works to increase the number of possible readings of a text. That being the case, an appropriate reading can be both appropriate and "wrong" (or incorrect) at the same time. Appropriate readings are comparable to experiments, where the reading starts from a position of possibility

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> nor does it set the rules to control it. Rather, it offers itself up to popular production; it exposes, however reluctantly, the vulnerabilities, limitations, and weaknesses of its preferred meanings; it contains, while attempting to repress them, voices that contradict the ones it prefers; it has loose ends that escapes its control, its meanings exceed its own power to discipline them, its gaps are wide enough for whole new texts to be produced in them—it is, in a very real sense, beyond its own control. (103-4)

While I don't think my text is reluctant to expose its own vulnerabilities, nor do I think it intentionally represses contradictory voices (however, one should note that few authors believe their texts do such things, so it is entirely possible I have unwittingly done so), I have tried to make my dissertation accessible and to refrain from imposing the laws of its own construction on the reader.

and explores that possibility. The result, the outcome of the appropriate reading, is not as important as the process of investigation and experience with the text that it provides the interpreter. Where the accurate reading concerns itself with the end result, the appropriate reading desires to foreground the process, the experience, the reading/interpreting journey. The accurate reading wants to determine "What is the answer," while the appropriate reading wants to find out "What happens if we look at the text this way?"

As a process-oriented project, it is only reasonable to include interpretations that do not pan out. As Sherman Paul, an advocate for what he calls "open criticism" ("Open(ing) Criticism" 3) states, "To include one's errors, one's mistakes, also belongs to the inclusivity of open form" (*The Lost America of Love* 224).[2] The process maintains those productive areas of interpretation where the ideas or insight gained might not relate directly or correctly to the text; it also allows those unproductive areas of interpretation to remain (perhaps they will be productive to someone else).

Another important aspect of a process-oriented critical project is that of flexibility. As Linda Reinfeld argues, once the reader overcomes the desire to find the one correct interpretation, when she encounters an indeterminate text she can engage in the creative play that the text implicitly asks for:

> Then, too, attending more to the drift of writing than to its direction offers some important tactical advantages, among them flexibility, interpretive range, and the possibility of surprise. I do not believe even the most self-consciously theoretical new poetry can be read fluently or well from a theoretically fixed position. Of course I am reluctant to make too much of a claim for reading this way and not otherwise (Language poetry is insistent about keeping options open), but the personal and improvisational character of my comments on specific poems seems to me entirely appropriate to the task at hand. Improvisation does not replace structure; it simply plays against it. (7)

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[2] Paul's notion of open criticism is roughly equivalent to Charles Olson's and other Black Mountain poets' notion of open, or process oriented poetry. See Paul's essay "Open(ing) Criticism."

Like Reinfeld, I do not propose that all critical projects need to be process oriented; however, the advantage of process criticism when dealing with indeterminate texts is that it keeps options open, which, as I see it, is perhaps the most important aspect of indeterminate poetry.

All this talk of process attacks a fundamental assumption of the conventional critical article. In many ways, the conventional critical article intentionally hides it own creation, its author's effort, in an attempt to appear as though it sprang fully-formed from the academic's head; the critic's final, best answer is presented in the article, but the critic rarely mentions the false steps or other possible answers that are equally valid. Another way of saying this is that the conventional article tends to look a text from one point of view and consequently offers only one answer, but the fact that only one answer appears implies that there is also only one correct point of view from which to view the text. This denial of process, consequently, works to support the notion of critical accuracy and correctness, that the article has broken the text's code and now has The Answer. This creates a hierarchy, where readers learn to judge interpretations as more or less correct, and so equivalently more or less worthwhile. The blurring of the author's active role in creating the essay also attempts to hide the author's personality and personal biases from the reader. Furthermore, the conventional article hides the creative aspect of interpretation; when critics say that an academic paper is not an act of creativity they distort what interpretation really is: creative reading. Process-oriented academic writing places the focus on the act of interpretation as a creative act, specifically as a creative act of one particular person. Along these lines, my dissertation is (in my opinion at least) no more or less creative than any other academic dissertation; it is merely more open about its creative underpinnings.

* * *

The emphasis on the role of the individual, creative mind in contact with the text has direct links to the social philosophy of anarchy; in fact, anarchy suffuses the thinking behind the formal aspects of this project. Generally misused in popular media as a term for unfocussed destructiveness, anarchy as a socio-political philosophy stresses the importance of the local, of the individual, and works towards doing away with the overarching socio-political structures (governments at all levels, but also ways of thinking that reify society) that anarchistic thinkers such as Michael Bakunin, Peter Kropotkin, and Emma Goldman generally blame for most, if not all, of society's problems. Anarchy focuses on doing away with all social, political, and economic hierarchies, working instead towards the establishment of smaller, more equitable and accountable forms of social organization—as George Woodcock defines anarchy, it is "a system of social thought, aiming at fundamental changes in the structure of society and particularly—for this is the common element uniting all forms [of anarchy]—at the replacement of the authoritarian state by some form of non-governmental co-operation between free individuals" (13).[3] Perhaps most importantly, anarchy is non-utopian; there is a firm sense that society must remain constantly changing, according to both time and place. To anarchist philosophers, utopias are just as stunted and reified as capitalist monopolies since both systems place external rules on individuals (anarchist thinkers question any external rules and usually discard them, since an external rule remains static while the world in which people live is fluid). The result is that anarchy promotes the idea that people and society are both indefinitely improvable and that society must be open-ended, evolving and changing in order for it to meet the new obstacles and opportunities that constantly develop.

To map my project as an act of anarchistic criticism is not difficult. To put it metaphorically, any overarching thesis acts towards academic criticism equivalent to how a government acts towards society: it is force that strives for order. Moreover, it works toward a specific goal (proving itself correct), just as governments work toward specific ends rather than focusing on process (depending on one's point of view, governments work towards either the goal of societal perfection—reified utopia—or the goal of proving themselves correct—thus ensuring the government will retain its power; of course, political parties in democratic systems tend to view these two goals as one and the same). Moreover, in the attempt to prove one specific interpretation correct, most academic work denies its existence in place and time, instead promoting the notion of somehow existing in an ethereal, super-historical/super-societal state, as though the thoughts it proposes are not dependent on the time and place in which the academic is working. Also, in its linearity, in its desire to prove itself, a conventional academic article tends to create a hierarchy, where the author ranks ideas in terms of importance according to how important they are to proving the thesis argument. My project attempts to locate the ideas it presents in a specific place and time, to offer them as necessarily incomplete and limited, since further ideas will always be added (either by myself or by others), and, through the denial of any overarching argument, to avoid creating a hierarchy of ideas/interpretations. I also use repetition and contradiction to try to keep the project from becoming reified, in that they ask the reader to accept or deny each entry in relation to the rest of the entries (or, preferably, to accept all the entries, even those that openly contradict each other).

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[3] There are many different strains of anarchy. For an excellent brief overview, see George Woodcock's "Prologue" to his book *Anarchism: A History of Libertarian Ideas and Movements.*

The focus on only one text by each author, independent from both that author's other works as well as the works of the other authors, is an attempt to investigate that text as an example of that particular moment in the author's career, rather than to investigate the authors trans-historically, mapping ideas from one text onto another, as though the authors' projects do not progress or change over time. To look trans-historically at literary works is to create a story, a plot that explains away anomalies. As Linda Hutcheon has argued, "A plot, be it seen as a narrative structure or as a conspiracy, is always a totalizing representation that integrates multiple and scattered events into one unified story" (68). My desire is to foreground, not to explain away, the scattered events of these indeterminate texts. For four of the texts I deal with, this argument should need no more justification; however, Duncan's *Passages* and Wah's "Music at the Heart of Thinking" are themselves specifically trans-historical projects (they are, in many ways, intended to be open-ended, since they are works that will be finished—though not necessarily completed—only with the author's death[4]). Therefore, Duncan and Wah present a localized interpretation of a trans-historical project, and, as such, there is an opportunity to legitimately view an author's work across time. What

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[4] *Passages*, then, came to an end with Duncan's death in February, 1988. As of when I write this note (March 22, 2005), "Music at the Heart of Thinking" remains on going—even if Wah were not to write another entry.

Wah and Duncan present their readers with in these two texts is a prolonged, trans-historical collage:

> The basic principle of collage construction in poetry was once described by Ron Loewinsohn as "the layering of frames of references." This layering can consist of elaborate cultural units, as in the Cantos, in the organization of discursive thought units characteristic of Olson, or in the delicate alignment of perceptual and syntactic units we have observed in objectivist nature poetry. In all these cases, collage allows a direct series of discrete objective notations fused into complex dimensions of interrelatedness not dependent on the interpretive will for dialectical synthesis. (Altieri 31)

The texts by Cage, McCaffery, Mouré, and Mullen offer the reader a chance to investigate a text that locates itself in a specific time while Duncan's and Wah's texts treat time itself as a collapsible entity, offering a series of poems that are disconnected from each other in terms of both time and place; the result is that these texts already rely on the reader to supply the missing resonances between sections that hold the series loosely together. Consequently, my investigations of these texts foreground the open-ended, non-hierarchical, and non-linear nature of *Passages* and "Music at the Heart of Thinking."

It might seem that anarchy's focus on the individual and the local, as well as its denial of external rules, would also mean a refusal to acknowledge authority of any kind. In terms of my project, readers might expect that anarchist criticism would mean a rejection of what others in my field have had to say. In both cases, however, this is not the case. The reason is that, as Michael Bakunin argues, anarchy does not argue in favour of discounting the expertise of other people; it merely stresses that each individual must consciously examine for him/herself the thoughts of others before accepting (or rejecting) them:

> Does it follow that I reject all authority? Far from me such a thought. In the matter of boots, I refer to the authority of the bootmaker; concerning houses, canals, or railroads, I consult that of the architect or engineer.

> For such or such special knowledge I apply to such or such a *savant*. But I allow neither the bootmaker nor the architect nor the *savant* to impose his authority upon me.... I recognize no infallible authority, even in special questions.... I have no absolute faith in any person. Such a faith would be fatal to my reason, to my liberty.... ("God and the State" 143)

What this means in terms of my project is that I (and the reader as well) must examine any statement by a critic before it can be accepted; in this regard, I see no difference here between my project and any other piece of intelligent academic criticism.

In fact, anarchy goes so far as to suggest the existence of strong trans-historical and trans-spatial ties between all people who have lived and who will live on Earth. This collective pool of ideas, inventions, and beliefs is open to anyone who chooses to make use of it; moreover, we each add to this pool through our daily actions: "There is not even a thought, or an invention, which is not common property, born of the past and present. Thousand of inventors, known and unknown, who have died in poverty, have co-operated in the invention of each of these machines which embody the genius of man" (Kropotkin 190). The belief in such a collective pool encourages people to engage with, expand upon, revise, renew, etc., the thoughts of others; consequently, anarchy is a philosophy that can thrive only when there is an open exchange of ideas and labour, not when individuals hold back or horde such things. It is possible, thinking anarchically, to view one's own work as an open-ended project: something that was started well before one's birth, and something that will be continued well past one's death.[5] The result is that a project such as mine is merely another voice in a great conversation (or, as Duncan put it, in the "grand collage" (*Bending the Bow* vii)); the expectation is not to offer the final word, but to be merely one point on a never-ending continuum (both synchronically and diachronically). In many ways, the following quotation by Emma Goldman summarizes the anarchistic elements of this project: "[Anarchism] is a living force in the affairs of our life, constantly creating new conditions. The methods of Anarchism therefore do not comprise an iron-clad program to be carried out under all circumstances. Methods must grow out of the economic needs of each place and clime, and of the intellectual and temperamental requirements of the individual" ("Anarchism: What it Really Stands For" 60).

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[5] This notion of the collective pool of knowledge which we all take from and add to constantly is similar to Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of the dialogic imagination, where all stories are the result of interaction between authors both from the past as well as the present and into the future.

Before moving on from my discussion of anarchy, I would like to point out that many of its main points have been accepted by critics who would not consider themselves anarchists (the ties between anarchy and Marxism, for instance, are deep and well documented). For example, Fredric Jameson's comments on the dangers of periodization share anarchy's distrust of overarching arguments and how critics use them in critical thought:

> I must now briefly address a different kind of objection to periodization, a different kind of concern about its possible obliteration of heterogeneity.... What happens is that the more powerful the vision of some increasingly total system or logic... the more powerless the reader comes to feel. Insofar as the theorist wins, therefore, by constructing an increasingly closed and terrifying machine, to that very degree he loses, since the critical capacity of his work is thereby paralysed, and the impulses of negation and revolt, not to speak of social transformation, are increasingly perceived as vain and trivial in the face of the model itself. (Jameson 66)

While Jameson would likely shudder at the thought of being labelled an anarchist, his distrust of totalizing arguments is one that most anarchists would deem anarchistic. Consequently, the notions that critics can go too far in their assessments and that, in their desire for unity and homogenization, they smooth over and do away with the rough edges that don't agree with their generalizing statements, are notions that are by no means held by anarchists alone. In this sense, I don't view my project as one that has reinvented the academic wheel; in fact, I see my project as merely offering a different form for ideas that have been already circling in the air.

* * *

Another way of describing my project is through the ideological ties between anarchy and Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque, specifically the grotesque body as it appears during carnival. In *Rabelais and His World,* Bakhtin describes carnival in terms very similar to those descriptive of anarchy:

> Rank was especially evident during official feasts; everyone was expected to appear in the full regalia of his calling, rank, and merits and to take the place corresponding to his position. It was a consecration of inequality. On the contrary, all were considered equal during carnival. Here, in the town square, a special form of free and familiar contact reigned among people who were usually divided by the barriers of caste, property, profession, and age. (10)

During carnival, social, political, and economic hierarchies were temporarily abandoned; as such, carnival represents a moment of social anarchy—though it must be pointed out that the church and the government systems kept these moments of carnival anarchy well defined and well controlled, providing clear boundaries that divided them from the hierarchies that loomed large during everyday society. The "safety-valve" notion of carnival (which argues that carnival granted the people only enough freedom to allow the rigid social hierarchies to maintain themselves) is quite well known. The thought that a project such as mine operates in a similar fashion—by being only challenging enough to reaffirm the usefulness of more conventional thetic, linear criticism—is one that haunts me; however, I believe that the readers must decide for themselves if the project does indeed bring about such a conservative outcome.

Bakhtin's notion of the grotesque is one that I think is particularly appropriate to my project. The grotesque body is a significant part of the carnival tradition; it is a body that denies its own boundaries, thus denying any firm separation between the body and the rest of the world. Bakhtin's description of the grotesque body resonates both with anarchy and with the Zen/Taoist philosophy of writers such as Duncan and Cage:

> Contrary to modern canons, the grotesque body is not separated from the rest of the world. It is not a closed, completed unit; it is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits. The stress is laid on those parts of the body that are open to the outside world, that is, the parts through which the world enters the body or emerges from it, or through

> which the body itself goes out to meet the world. This means that the emphasis is on the apertures or the convexities, or on various ramifications and offshoots…. (Bakhtin 26)

This emphasis on transgression, on incompleteness, resonates quite strongly with my desire to create a writerly, non-linear, non-hierarchical, a-thetic style of academic criticism. As such, I think it is possible to think of the chapters that follow, with their repetitions, dislocations, contradictions, etc., as examples of grotesque criticism, where the text refuses to adhere to the boundaries of conventional criticism (linearity, hierarchy, resolution, etc.). I believe that both the texts that I deal with as well as my investigations refuse to acknowledge or follow the strict customs of conventional writing.

Moreover, Bakhtin stresses the ambiguous nature of the grotesque. Specifically, the grotesque's ambiguity comes from its twin focuses on degradation and rebirth: "The essential principle of grotesque realism is degradation, that is, the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity" (Bakhtin 19-20); this degradation, however, intends to recreate what it destroys, to give it new life: "Degradation here means coming down to earth, the contact with earth as an element that swallows up and gives birth at the same time. To degrade is to bury, to sow, and to kill simultaneously, in order to bring forth something more and better" (Bakhtin 21). At its heart, what this grotesque ambiguity accomplishes is a renewal that denies reification. In this sense, the grotesque shares anarchy's belief in the open-ended nature of existence and the continual need for society to change.

Bakhtin places official seriousness in direct contrast to the grotesque. From the seventeenth century onwards, Bakhtin sees the grotesque tradition losing more and more sway to the official, serious culture: "In the new official culture [of the seventeenth century] there prevails a tendency toward the stability and completion of being, toward one single meaning, one single tone of seriousness. The ambivalence of the grotesque can no longer be admitted" (101). With its emphasis on singular meaning, stability, and completion of both the critic's and the reader's being, conventional academic criticism performs the role of official seriousness. A project such as mine, which shares fundamental connections with anarchy and grotesque realism, is radically different from conventional criticism: my goals are to promote critical ambiguity, openness, instability, and transgression.

* * *

Finally, since my project attempts to foreground its own creation and limitations, it is important to situate myself as a person. I do not intend the thoughts I present in my dissertation to be the final, impersonal thoughts of some idealized reader/critic. Consequently, I would like the reader to keep in mind my own personal and necessarily limited authorial subjectivity. The thoughts I present are necessarily the thoughts of a young(ish) white male, one who has received academic training (of a hopefully adequate quality) in English studies over the past thirteen years. These thoughts have been given to me through the contributions of dozens of professors spread out over four Canadian universities starting in 1991; they have been further shaped by my own thoughts on the subjects, as well as my reading of many other critics, theorists, and poets. I have by no means been economically well off in my life, but I have also certainly never starved. I have received all those privileges, benefits, and shortcomings, undeserved, undesired, and often unacknowledged and unknowable, that are given by nature and society to young, heterosexual white males from a working-class background in late-twentieth century Canada; my position in the intellectual and economic societies of Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, in other words, is certainly one of relative economic, social, and physical safety, if not outright privilege. I do not point to myself in order to draw the reader's admiration, but merely to remind the reader of my own biases, beliefs, blindspots, insights, strengths and weaknesses. The words of the (white) Marxist critic H. Bruce Franklin will hopefully further explain my desire to locate my own subjectivity in my project:

> What the academic establishments presents as American literature is still basically the literature of certain white people. . . . I do not mean to suggest that Black literature was excluded from the canon of American literature because of the skin color of its authors. If those professors

> editing anthologies, surveying the literary history, and teaching the courses, could have found some Blacks who wrote like the white men they admired they would have been only too pleased to include them in their pantheon. These gentlemen are pained and shocked to hear themselves accused of racism, because they are merely applying the same criteria to Black literature as they do to all literature. That is precisely the point, for the criteria they apply are determined by their own nation and class, and Afro-American literature conforms to criteria determined by a different nation and a different class. (Qtd in William J. Harris, *The Poetry and Poetics of Amiri Baraka* 124).

I have maintained and stated many more personal biases, assumptions, and presumptions throughout my dissertation than I am consciously aware of; I hope that the readers of this project will actively note and acknowledge my personal ideological quirks. Considering I am writing about authors who offer a wide range of social, sexual, racial, and economic points of view, I think it is imperative that I not distance myself too far from my material. This is in no way meant to excuse any of my opinions; it is merely meant to contextualize them for the reader.

2. Connections: The Project and the Poets

Some words from the writers with whom I'm dealing:

John Cage:

> The mesostics on the name of Joyce... are a form of poetry which I devised that enables me to read all the way through a book that otherwise I would not read through. I find that if I involve myself in some kind of discovery, then I can get through a situation in which I otherwise have difficulty. If I had set out to try to understand *Finnegans Wake*, I wouldn't have been so attracted to read it. But if through reading it I

> made something, which is a discovery, then I'm excited.[6] (*Conversing With Cage* 25)
>
> People… still have great difficulty paying attention to something they don't understand. I think that the division is between understanding and experiencing, and many people think that art has to do with understanding, but it doesn't. It has to do with experience; and if you understand something, then you walk out once you get the point because you don't want the experience. You don't want to be irritated.[7] (*Conversing With Cage* 115)
>
> All consistency is, really, is getting one idea and not deviating from it, even if the circumstances change so radically that one ought to deviate….[8] (*Conversing With Cage* 45)
>
> Well, if you open *Finnegans Wake*, which I think is without doubt the most important book of the twentieth century, you will see that it is just nonsense. Why is it nonsense? So that it can make a multiplicity of

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[6] Cage draws a distinction between understanding a text and making something out of that text. Cage's "Writing for the Second Time Through Finnegans Wake" is an act of creative reading, where Cage as writerly reader literally creates a new text from Joyce's novel. The implicit distinction in Cage's understanding/making binary is the difference between reading an indeterminate text with the intention of logically ordering that text and reading an indeterminate text as an act of (re-)experiencing the text. It seems reasonable to me, then, to view Cage's poem as a text to be experienced, not understood, where, I believe, the latter implies a need to logically control and limit the text's indeterminacies.

[7] Here Cage explicitly deals with the distinction between understanding and experiencing. Specifically, for Cage understanding is an act of determining a set of rules or a pattern for the text; these rules take away the enjoyment of the indeterminate text, in a way similar to solving a puzzle. Once the reader feels that s/he has solved the text, there is no need to continue engaging with the text. The act of logically ordering, in other words, is not what Cage views as the most profitable way to engage with indeterminate texts.

[8] Consistency, the act of remaining true to a set of ideas, beliefs, opinions, expectations, etc., is, for Cage, a matter of inflexibility or stubbornness. He equates consistency with reification; the implication is that people must move past consistency in order to heighten their experience of the world and all its texts.

> sense, and you can choose your path, rather than being forced down Joyce's.[9] (*Conversing With Cage* 147)

Robert Duncan:

> Our engagement with knowing, with craft and lore, our demand for truth is not to reach a conclusion but to keep our exposure to what we do not know, to confront our wish and our need beyond habit and capability, beyond what we can take for granted, at the borderline, the light fingertip or thought-tip where impulse and novelty spring."[10] ("Towards an Open Universe" 12)

Steve McCaffery:

> The writing proposed is less the exclusive code of the author, theologically transmitted *down* to a reader recipient than a productive field which a reader can enter to mobilize significations. Proposed then is a shift from sign consumption to sign production and a siting of meaning in a productive engagement with writings' indeterminacies."[11] ("Diminished Reference and the Model Reader" 15)

> Language today no longer poses problems of meaning but practical issues of use; the relevant question being not 'what does this piece of

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[9] Nonsense (which I equate with inconsistency and experience) allows the reader to actively engage with the text on a creative level, where *creative* means both that the reader is free to create individual meaning(s) from the text, and that the reader is a necessary co-producer of the text (a text without an active reader is a reified text). Cage explicitly calls for the reader to actively re/make his texts; the reader best achieves this act of making when the mind is left open: experiencing, non-logical, non-linear, and non-hierarchical.

[10] Duncan explicitly calls for an open-ended or anarchic type of knowing, which is non-teleological and non-hierarchical. According to Duncan, this anarchic knowledge requires readers to maintain what "we do not know," those indeterminate questions for which an answer should not be sought. As with Cage, Duncan implicitly equates logical understanding with a stultifying reification of the indeterminate text.

[11] McCaffery calls for readers to engage the indeterminate text in what Barthes defines as a writerly fashion. Like Cage and Duncan, McCaffery calls for the reader to take an active role in the creation of the text's meaning; however, McCaffery goes further by openly stating that such an active role necessarily places the reader/creator on the same level of importance as the text's writer/creator. With such an equality, the indeterminate text remains open to every reader's interpretation, implicitly refusing to admit the existence of a correct reading.

> writing mean'? (as if meaning was somehow a represented essence in a sign the activity of reading substantially extracts) but 'how does this writing work.'"[12] ("Language Writing" 149)

> For if we agree that the paragram can be both fortuitous and intentional, a conscious creation *and* a trans-phenomenal infra-production, then we must further admit to the infinite resourcefulness of language itself to produce aimlessly and fulfill in effect all the features Bataille assigns to a general economy: unmasterable excess, inevitable expenditure and a thoroughly non-productive outlay.[13] ("Writing as General Economy" 209)

Erin Mouré:

> I get more resistant to being required to mean something [in my poetry] and I think that's why I look at the visual value and sound value of words, and try to take away the denotative value of things all together, or at least not make it bear all the weight. In spite of what the reader has learned to desire. There is more than one way to read.... I want to write something that makes it impossible to pose that question ["What does the author mean?"].... The question "what does the author mean?" does not and cannot exhaust meaning.[14] ("Acknowledging the Red Spades" 129)

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[12] Like Cage, McCaffery dismisses the notion of meaning (which in McCaffery's usage is roughly equivalent to Cage's use of *understanding*) in favour of the process of engaging with the text ("how does this text work?" is roughly equivalent to the experiential/creative reading practices put forward by Cage and Duncan).

[13] McCaffery goes so far as to argue that all language texts are indeterminate, due to the "unmasterable excess" he sees in language. The paragram's existence in this sense is not as important as the fact that it can never be truly controlled; language will create paragrams without the author's notice. Consequently, to speak of language as a tool that any one person or group of people can control is absurd. The result is that, for McCaffery, there can be no such thing as a correct reading of a text; all readings are provisional.

If such a provisionality is an essential part of an interpretation, I would argue that to cloak an interpretation in the guise of finality is to attempt to ignore the excessive meanings in all language-based texts. Better, in my opinion, to openly promote the active, questioning reading of critical texts.

[14] In her attempt to take away or lessen the denotative meaning of words, Mouré stresses that there are many other ways for language to mean. Even though she turns to the visual and to the sound aspects of language, Mouré still acknowledges that meaning exists in language. For these reasons, what most people

> Critics should open the work. They should try to create a critical language that can help individuals approach the work."[15] ("Acknowledging the Red Spades" 130)

Harryette Mullen:

> Evidently, publishers of African-American anthologies are entirely uninterested in my more recent work, from *Trimmings* on. Only in the earlier poetry, represented by the work in *Tree Tall Woman*, or similarly "speakerly" poems, am I digestible as a black poet. My two prose poem books, *Trimmings…* and *S*PeRM**K*T…*, apparently go overlooked by those seeking to incorporate me into an African American poetic tradition, just as those who praise the prose poems generally do not connect them to the emphatically ethnic poetic "voice" of *Tree Tall Woman*, which seems markedly inflected by race, class, gender, culture, and region, compared to the more ambiguously located subjectivity of *Trimmings* and *S*PeRM**K*T.*[16] ("Poetry and Identity" 86-87)
>
> I thought that the music of [*Muse & Drudge*] would carry any reader through the poem. And whether they understood every line or not is not really essential to me. I want them to hear it as poetry; I want them to get

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have been accustomed to focusing on, the denotative meaning of language, becomes merely one plane of meaning among many others.

[15] The result of opening text to different planes of meaning is that critics dealing with Mouré's poetry (or with the poetry of the other authors dealt with in my project) must not privilege one plane of meaning over the others. Mouré calls for critics to engage with indeterminate poetry in such a way that the text is not explained or decoded. Opening the text is a matter of allowing the reader to establish a series of connections with the poem; these connections in no way need to limit the possibilities of meaning that the text provides.

[16] Mullen's comments provide an indirect complaint against the limiting nature of conventional academic thinking, the either/or thinking that leads to the arbitrary and unfair distinctions she mentions. Her comments also point to the dangers in trying to deal with an author diachronically; although her early work was quite readerly, her later poetry has been distinctly writerly. To try to reconcile these differences via a resort to Mullen's authorial subjectivity is to limit her personal subjectivity to an unchanging, reified notion of all-encompassing diachronic wholeness by implying that she always had the complete capability and circumstance to choose the formal aspect of her work. This negates the possibility of Mullen learning more about poetry and its craft as she grows older.

flashes and glimpses of recognition that come from their own experience and connect with parts of the poem that are familiar."[17] ("The Solo Mysterioso Blues" 664)

Fred Wah:

This notion of "making strange" is an old one but it has gained currency recently via the oft-quoted 1917 statement by the Russian Formalist critic Victor Shklovsky:

> *And art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stony. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects "unfamiliar," to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object; the object is not important (12).*

Even the varied lexicon of critical desire and possibility shows a continuing need to reinvent/renew perception that otherwise might reify: defamiliarization, deconstruction, displacement, negative capability, or nonnarrative, not knowing, indeterminacy, silence, distortion, parataxis, non referentiality, dictation, ambiguity, disfunctioning, fragmentation, derivation, opposition, divergence, alter-native, and on and on.[18] ("Strang(l)ed Poetics" 24)

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[17] Mullen combines the emphasis on language's sound that Mouré raised earlier with the writerly creative role of the reader raised directly by McCaffery and Cage. Most important is Mullen's unconcern in regards to the reader understanding the minutiae of the text; instead, the reader is free to import her/his own personal experiences, beliefs, thoughts, etc., into the text's meaning. This necessarily negates the notion of a unified, singular *correct* meaning or interpretation.

[18] Wah's comments on Shklovsky's notion of *ostranie* emphasize the desire to revivify reified forms of thinking and of language in order to bring about the new perceptions that may arise. All six poets I deal with create this *ostranie*/estrangement in their work. My project is an attempt to avoid explaining away these moments of intellectual delay in order to allow the reader to still experience the text's "making strange."

> In order to prolong the moment, and the perceptions available in the delay, the movement, the expectation of movement, must be disturbed and fragmented."[19] ("Strang(l)ed Poetics" 30)

> [Myrna] Kostash is indicating the position of applied, chosen, desired, and necessary estrangement that has become a primary unit of composition for many Canadian writers as they seek to deterritorialize inherited literary forms and language, as they seek a heat through friction. This is a poetics of paradox. We know ourselves by our resistances, a teacher once instructed me…. This principle of synchronous foreignicity, … of embracing antithesis, polarity, confusion, and opposition as the day-to-day household harmony, is a necessary implement in art that looks for new organizing principles, new narratives.[20] ("A Poetics of Ethnicity" 60-61)

* * *

Two of the common reactions that some readers have to indeterminate poetry are that there is often either a dissatisfaction with the indeterminacies, a feeling that the author made a mistake (either intentionally or unintentionally), resulting in a murkiness that needs to be clarified, or the reader experiences an exhilaration at the thought that the text contains a mystery that must be solved. I believe that both of these opinions are the result of the reader's uncomfortableness with the thought of chaos in a text. For those readers who fit the former description, there is an implied belief that the text is, to a greater or lesser degree, meaningless gobbledygook; for those following the latter description, the text is a message that needs to be decoded or solved in order to discover the text's hidden, *real* meaning. However, as N. Katherine Hayles argues, the relationship between chaos and meaning is already productive, not reductive, of meaning: she states that "chaotic systems [are] rich in information rather than poor in order" (6). Hayles goes on to explain the relationship between indeterminate texts and meaning:

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[19] This estrangement is necessarily only a fleeting thing, since the human mind tends to adapt to new thoughts and stimuli by incorporating them into its existing thought matrices. However, the moment of estrangement stresses these matrices and forces them to evolve/progress/adapt/revise themselves. For a critic to logically explain away these moments of rupture is to defuse the text's primary challenge and ultimate benefit to the reader. Quite simply, these texts want to remain fragmented in the reader's mind for as long as possible.

[20] Simply put, "antithesis, polarity, confusion, and opposition" are not problems to be solved in the indeterminate text, nor are they flaws to be corrected. In fact, these elements are often the primary formal aspect of the text; to try to explain them away or solve them is to defuse the indeterminacies that the text contains when it is unreified.

> [T]he information content of a message increase[s] as elements become more improbable.... [W]hen there is no uncertainty about what the message will be, [the amount of information relayed] drops to zero, just as it does when the message is completely improbable. Maximum information is conveyed when there is a mixture of order and surprise, when the message is partly anticipated and partly surprising. (53)

Consequently, when readers set out to find the text's hidden meaning or when they attempt to remove or explain away the contradictions, paradoxes, or puzzles found in an indeterminate text, what they are really doing is limiting the amount of information the text passes on to the reader.

The goal of my dissertation is not to leave the text completely mysterious or chaotic (if such a text exists), but merely to try to leave a good mixture of both uncertainty and certainty in these indeterminate texts, in order to keep the texts vital for as long as possible.[21]

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[21] Renato Poggioli, in *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, puts forward a different (though not really opposing) viewpoint from Hayles; Poggioli states that "while art can be aristocratic, mysterious and ambiguous, criticism ought always to exercise a democratic function, that is to say, an educative and clarifying function.... [Criticism should] address itself to the public and to illuminat[ing] both the work of art and the spirit that contemplates it" (Poggioli 155). The reason that Poggioli's opinion does not directly oppose Hayles is that when Poggioli emphasizes the need for illuminating the work and educating the reader, he does not mean that the critic should practice exegesis. Instead, Poggioli argues that critics should devote themselves to making the reader aware of the ideas and theories behind the indeterminate text (which in Poggioli's mind is roughly equivalent to the works of the avant-garde):

> [T]he obscurity of avant-garde art is not resolved solely by recourse to exegesis. This, never absolutely necessary for a well-disposed or prepared reader, cannot be enough when the reader-spectator is incapable of overcoming his innate antipathy. Without denying the efficacy of education and familiarity, the obscurity of modern art will remain an insurmountable obstacle for those who consciously refuse to give at least a provisional assent; but for those who can assent, even if only in principle, the most arduous asperities will be surmountable, the works most resisting understanding made accessible. The interpretation of avant-garde art is then essentially not a problem of

As I mentioned earlier, I don't believe my project has reinvented the academic wheel. There have been earlier critics working along lines similar to mine. One such critic is Sherman Paul, whose notion of open criticism has definite correlations to my project. Paul's description of open criticism comes directly from Creeley/Olson's call to view form and content as one and the same thing:

> Not only is it requisite to replace judgmental with admirative criticism ("admire first," Gaston Bachelard counsels, "then you will understand"), it is necessary to enter a universe, in actuality as well as of discourse, where this [open criticism] is possible—where we do not find ourselves separated from either art-object or reader but immediately related to them as elements of our "occasion" in the "field." The model [for] open criticism, as "occasion" and "field" suggest, might well be the open poetics brought forward so vigorously in our time.... (*Hewing* 4)

Paul's call for admirative criticism is similar to Poggioli's call for readers to approach avant-garde texts with a "provisional assent" (154), with an open mind that is willing to accept as worthwhile the text's basic assumptions. However, I take issue with admirative criticism, in that I do not believe it is necessary for the critic to be an overly positive champion of each specific text he or she deals with. In fact, for reasons that I will go into in depth in the third section of this introduction, I believe that anarchic criticism, in order to avoid becoming a tool that recuperates indeterminate texts, might need to focus mostly on the shortcomings or drawbacks of those texts, leaving the moments of true joy untheorized.

However, Paul's emphasis on the process, as opposed to the outcome, of the critical act is one that I deeply agree with. Like Wah, he refers back to Keats's notion of negative capability when stressing the need for critics to avoid seeking out too many answers in their interpretations:

> exegesis but of psychology, since it is only after being made possible by factors of calling and attitude that interpretation is made easy by education and familiarity. (Poggioli 154)

For Poggioli, then, the job of the critic is to try to expand the reader's frame of reference (what he refers to as the reader's *psychology*); the reader must be made aware of what is at stake, so to speak, in an indeterminate text. Only after the reader is willing to encounter the indeterminate text with an expectation of satisfaction will the reader be able to find any satisfaction in it.

> An open universe is a process universe. Both "open" and "process" tell us that it is a universe of risk (and possibility), of chaos (and creativity). To enter such a world we must yield the ego and its imposing rationality for the enabling condition of responsiveness Keats so fittingly called Negative Capability. We must become "capable of being [yes: capable of being] in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason…." (*Hewing* 5)

In my opinion, though, Paul's admirative criticism leads his open criticism to be rather shallow and overly concerned with his own emotional responses. He often takes his focus off the texts he is dealing with and puts it too much on his own subjective responses. Paul seems to offer an over-corrective to the traditional, supposedly subject-free, authorially detached academic criticism against which he argues.

My personal solution to the problem open criticism poses is to completely embrace the supposedly detached critical stance, but without embracing the overarching arguments almost always driving critical pieces written in this fashion. Due to the lack of a thetic argument, I am free to contradict and disagree with myself throughout my project, both implicitly and explicitly. I am free to present as many different sides to the text as possible; I am not concerned with determining which thoughts are the most correct, and so all thoughts co-exist outside an intellectual hierarchy. Consequently, I view anarchic criticism as working best when it openly over-explains aspects of indeterminate texts; this might at first seem to be a paradox, but I believe this critical over-explanation is the best way to intellectually engage with an indeterminate text without limiting its possible meanings. For example, if a critic were to offer only one explanation or interpretation for a specific text, then what the critic has offered is the explanation or interpretation that s/he believes to be the most correct—the only truly correct explanation. However, if that same critic were to offer two possible explanations or interpretations for the same text, without privileging one explanation over the other, then the text remains partially open; because of the opening created by the multiple readings, the reader can engage with the text and decide for him/herself which of the critic's interpretations is correct. This, of course, merely delays the limiting of the text, however, since the reader is still likely to try to determine which of the interpretations is the correct one (capitalism, war and sport culture, the myth of the hero, and other popular metanarratives of competition have permeated our intellectual climate to such a degree that I believe they have conditioned us to constantly strive for the One answer—think of it as the intellectual equivalent of *American Idol*, if you will forgive the allusion). If, on the other hand, the critic were to offer as many different interpretations as possible without privileging any of them (and if the critic is capable of introducing more possible interpretations than her/his reader might have been able to offer without reading the critic's work), then the critic has actually served to open the text up; what I believe, then, is that instead of working towards consensus, the critic should work towards dissensus, towards plurality. Somewhat surprisingly, over-explanation is a tool towards this plurality, not towards consensus, in that multiple interpretations presented in a non-hierarchical fashion help to prod the reader away from looking for the One correct answer.

Even more than Sherman Paul, Susan Sontag is a critic whose work supports the need for open or anarchic criticism. In her foundational essay "Against Interpretation," published in 1966, Sontag explains what she sees as the ingrained, reified habit of interpretation:

> Though the actual developments in many arts may seem to be leading us away from the idea that a work of art is primarily its content, the idea still exerts an extraordinary hegemony. I want to suggest that this is because the idea is now perpetuated in the guise of a certain way of encountering works of art thoroughly ingrained among most people who take any of the arts seriously. What the overemphasis on the idea of content entails is the perennial, never consummated project of *interpretation*. And, conversely, it is the habit of approaching works of art in order to *interpret* them that sustains the fancy that there really is such a thing as the content of a work of art. (5)

The problem, then, is not that interpretation takes place, so much as the fact that people sometimes begin to view interpretation as the only, the natural, the proper way to engage with a text. Sontag goes on to define interpretation:

> By interpretation, I mean here a conscious act of the mind which illustrates a certain code, certain "rules" of interpretation.
>
> Directed to art, interpretation means plucking a set of elements (the X, the Y, the Z, and so forth) from the whole work. The task of interpretation is virtually one of translation. The interpreter says, Look, don't you see that X is really—or, really means—a? That Y is really B? That Z is really C? (5)

Interpretation, then, is not really an act of engaging with the text at all; instead, it is an act of moving through, moving past the text in order to find another, hidden sub-text that is considered to be the important or *real* text:

> Interpretation thus presupposes a discrepancy between the clear meaning of the text and the demands of (later) readers. It seeks to resolve that discrepancy. The situation is that for some reason a text has become unacceptable; yet it cannot be discarded. Interpretation is a radical strategy for conserving an old text, which is thought too precious to repudiate, by revamping it. The interpreter, without actually erasing or rewriting the text, *is* altering it. But he can't admit to doing this. He claims to be only making it intelligible, by disclosing its true meaning.... The old style of interpretation was insistent, but respectful; it erected another meaning on top of the literal one. The modern style of interpretation excavates, and as it excavates, destroys; it digs "behind" the text, to find a sub-text which is the true one. (Sontag 6)

Sontag's definition of modern-style interpretation comes very close to what I would describe as an active, writerly process of reading; as such, I disagree with her complete dismissal of this type of interpretation. However, before I go into the areas where I disagree with Sontag, I would first like to point out the areas of agreement.

There are two fundamental areas where I agree with Sontag. The first has to do with the danger of imposing the critic's own ideology onto the text; for Sontag, this is necessarily part of interpretation: "Interpretation, based on the highly dubious theory that a work of art is composed of items of content, violates art. It makes art into an article for use, for arrangement into a mental scheme of categories" (Sontag 10). These mental schemes of categories correspond roughly to my notion of what happens when a text becomes reified or recuperated. To offer a limited interpretation of an indeterminate text, either intentionally or unintentionally, is an attempt to limit the possible meanings that text can contain; it is an attempt to make the indeterminate text determinate. Moreover, the more persuasive or correct an interpretation appears, the more limiting it is; consequently, the most persuasive interpretation of indeterminate texts is actually the most intellectually limiting, since it will become the generally held explanation of the text. The problem, then, is that the interpreter fixes firm boundaries onto the text, boundaries which are possibly in the text, but only as possible limits that exist among a myriad of other limits.

The second point of agreement I share with Sontag is her call for critics to focus on the form rather than the content of the text. Most critics concerned with understanding or explaining an indeterminate text attempt to map an interpretation onto the content, often ignoring or dismissing the formal experimentations.[22] In her desire to move criticism away from interpretation, Sontag calls for the critic's emphasis to shift towards the text's form:

> What is needed, first, is more attention to form in art. If excessive stress on *content* provokes the arrogance of interpretation, more extended and

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[22] Even an otherwise admirable critic such as Marjorie Perloff sometimes succumbs to this desire to overlook some or all of the formal aspects of indeterminate texts in an attempt to impose an interpretation. For example, in her book *Poetics of Indeterminacy*, she dismisses the formal aspects of John Cage's lecture poems ("Lecture on Nothing" is likely the best known of these), where chance and/or mathematical arrangements, intricate spacing on the page, choice of fonts, etc., play a fundamental role in the *experience* of reading the piece, as mere "gimmickry" (308). Instead, she concentrates on "the relationship of narrative to conceptual statement in Cage's verbal structures" (310), and proceeds to deal with the much more formally conventional pieces of Cage's writing (Perloff draws most of her generalizations about Cage's work from the formally conventional prose pieces/prose poems in his *Diary: How To Improve The World (You Will Only Make Matters Worse)*). In other words, Perloff must manipulate Cage's works in ways that deny Cage's goal of indeterminacy in order to deal with them in the manner she wishes.

> more thorough description of *form* would silence. What is needed is a vocabulary—a descriptive, rather than prescriptive, vocabulary—for forms. The best criticism, and it is uncommon, is of this sort that dissolves considerations of content into those of form. (12)

While I definitely agree that there should be a greater critical emphasis on the form of indeterminate texts, I don't think that such an emphasis would, in itself, solve the problem of reifying texts. Specifically, I think it is just as possible to critically limit the text through an interpretation of its form as through an interpretation of its content. What I would prefer is a focus that moves through both content and form in such a way that the text is as open as possible to different possible meanings or interpretations.

As with Paul, Sontag's comments against interpretation are an attack on intellectual thought. She would prefer, for example, to have critics rely more on what I call sensual understanding:

> In a culture whose already classical dilemma is the hypertrophy of the intellect at the expense of energy and sensual capability, interpretation is the revenge of the intellect upon art.
>
> Even more. It is the revenge of the intellect upon the world. (Sontag 7)

This emphasis on sensual understanding goes in a direction different from that of my project. Sontag's call for sensual understanding is not radically different from my desire for experiential understanding, but my project is still grounded in the kind of intellectual interpretation that Sontag discounts. However, where Sontag thinks that intellectual interpretation must necessarily limit the text, I believe that offering an overabundance of interpretations is a way to move past the limiting aspect of interpretation.[23]

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[23] My thoughts on the usefulness of over-explanation might be better explained by offering a short prose piece that I wrote several years ago; it was intended to serve as an introduction to a series of anaphora poems that I was writing at the time:

WHY ANAPHORA?

Name something once, and you've fixed it. Stable. Certain. Motionless.

Name something twice, and choice invades the proposition. Which one is correct?

Name something twenty, fifty, one hundred times, and you've unnamed it. Freedom. Uncertain. Movement.

Heisenberg said that the path of a particle can never be determined, because the mere act of looking shifts the particle from its path. The *Tao te Ching* states that "The name that can be named / Is not the constant name."

Moreover, I would argue that an overabundance of interpretations would also work to stress the process of the act of reading/interpreting texts, suggesting the intellectual joy that usually sparks the beginning of any serious investigation of a text. In fact, I would argue that it is a false distinction to separate intellectual understanding from sensual understanding, which is, in the end, what Sontag does: "The function of criticism should be to show *how it is what it is*, even *that it is what it is*, rather than to show what it *means*" (14). While I agree that the attempt to give the correct meaning of a text is to unnecessarily limit that text, I would argue that opening up a multiplicity of meanings is a way to experience a text in a multiplicity of ways, which is a way of keeping the text as fresh as possible. Sontag is oddly anti-intellectual and pro-sensual here; I think the distinction between experience and intellect is wrong.[24] To me, intellect (meaning) is part of experience, one that operates alongside, not in opposition to, the sensual.

Because of these disagreements with Sontag, I would prefer to use the idea of Roland Barthes, who calls for an authorless text. For Barthes, accepting an authorless, depthless text is the way to overcome the drive to determine indeterminate texts:

> Once the Author is removed, the claim to decipher a text becomes quite futile. To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing. Such a conception

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That's what anaphorae are all about, the unnaming of names, the removal of the easy, old ideas that the labels have brought to the thing over the years, to bridge the distances that these old ideas have placed between the thing-as-name in our mind, and the thing-as-thing in its thing- ness.

The term "anaphora" is Greek for "carrying back, repetition," and refers to the rhetorical device of repeating a word or phrase over and over. The Old Testament used it all the time, and Ginsberg used it in "Howl." Sometimes it is a supple fox. Sometimes it is a whispering serpent. Sometimes it is a hollow bone in the mind's wing.

To let go of names, to accept a thing in its thing-ness, is both frightening and necessary. It clutters the mind and doesn't allow for any simple, pre-packaged ideas; the clutter eventually unclutters by refusing to unclutter. An apple isn't "apple," but sweet, sin, worm-home, windfall, spring on the tongue, tree, seed, life, grocery store, share, leaf, shade, wind-chime, Newton- bonking, miracle, and so much more. Confusion, experience, unknowing is the soul of an anaphora. Does a dictionary really tell you what "anger" is? Is a fire only the flame, or is it also each spark that shoots off into the wind?

When you read an anaphora, relax, and let the images pour over you. When you read an anaphora, don't try to make logical sense of it all; instead, take a dip in the warm bubble bath of confusion. Let the mind shut off for a few moments--it deserves a vacation.

Why anaphora? because, because, because.

[24] Douglas Barbour, in a written note, pointed out to me that Sontag herself was always careful to focus on the intellectual aspect of academic work. As he suggested, it is worthwhile noting that Sontag's essay "Against Interpretation" was published in 1966 and its professed anti-intellectualism is very much a product of that time period.

> suits criticism very well, the latter then allotting itself the important task of discovering the Author (or its hypostases: society, history, psyche, liberty) beneath the work: when the Author has been found, the text is 'explained' – victory to the critic. Hence there is no surprise in the fact that, historically, the reign of the Author has also been that of the Critic, nor again in the fact that criticism (be it new) is today undermined along with the Author. In the multiplicity of writing, everything is to be disentangled, nothing deciphered; the structure can be followed, 'run' (like the thread of a stocking) at every point and at every level, but there is nothing beneath: the space of writing is to be ranged over, not pierced; writing ceaselessly posits meaning ceaselessly to evaporate it, carrying out a systematic exemption of meaning. In precisely this way literature (it would be better from now on to say writing), by refusing to assign a 'secret', an ultimate meaning, to the text (and to the world as text), liberates what may be called an anti-theological activity, an activity that is truly revolutionary since to refuse to fix meaning is, in the end, to refuse God and his hypostases – reason, science, law. (Barthes 147)

Even though I am working with six specific texts, each with one official author,[25] I would argue that my project resists the desire to give these texts an Author in the sense that Barthes means, where the Author must have a determinate, fixed, reified subjectivity. Instead, the overabundance of interpretation fractures the authorial subject by refusing to pin down any specifics, by refusing to determine which interpretations are the most correct, and by refusing to offer a diachronic breadth of scope where the Author's career (and consequently her/his subjectivity) is plotted and graphed. In its attempt to avoid reifying the text, my project is also an attempt to avoid reifying either my own subjectivity or the subjectivity of the authors of the texts with which I'm working.

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[25] I would argue that Cage's "Writing for the Second Time Through *Finnegans Wake*" and Mouré's *Pillage Laud*, due to their reliance on base texts created by another author (Joyce and computer-generated prose, respectively) are texts that deny the easy distinction of what the author of a text really is; Duncan's *Passages* and Wah's "Music at the Heart of Thinking," which both rely heavily on dialogic engagements with other texts also, although to a lesser degree, work to undermine the notion of single authorship.

* * *

In her book *Language Poetry: Writing as Rescue*, Linda Reinfeld suggests what makes an indeterminate text indeterminate: "To read the indeterminate text is to enable, to envision, to demystify. At the same time there is no sense in which the text permits us to decide that we are in our readings finally right. There is always something left over, something unaccounted for; a remnant, a remainder, it sticks, it cannot be articulated…" (20-1). This remainder—flexible, unfixable, indefinable—always works to exceed the reader's logical grasp; it wants to remain unreified and vital. However, conventional criticism generally attempts to explain, interpret, and limit the texts it deals with; the critic has a will to power over the text, so to speak. For conventional texts, this limiting, interpreting type of criticism is often unfortunate, but I don't think it is truly damaging (in my opinion, conventional, determinate texts intend to communicate their ideas to the reader in a straightforward, unhampered fashion; in this sense, explicating or interpreting a determinate text can be seen as an example of the critic helping the text reach its goal: a transmission of ideas).[26] However, the goal of the indeterminate text is not straightforward transmission; in fact, it is exactly the opposite. The indeterminate text attempts to force the reader to re-examine the systems of meaning that s/he usually passively overlooks and accepts as mere tools of communication; consequently, indeterminate texts must remain difficult, they must retain their remainders, in order to maintain their purpose. Charles Bernstein, himself a major writer of indeterminate poetry, argues that limiting, conventional critical writing on the texts of Gertrude Stein necessarily warps her texts away from their goal of indeterminacy:

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[26] This is not to say that indeterminacy is non-existent in a determinate text; as far as language is an inexact tool, the possibility of linguistic indeterminacy exists in every linguistic communication: words mean different things to every recipient. However, as I view it, a linguistically determinate text consciously works to do away with as much linguistic indeterminacy as possible, so that the author can transmit his or her ideas to the reader. In this sense, readers of a determinate text often regard any appearances of linguistic indeterminacy in that text as a mistake or as the result of a shortcoming on the author's part.

On another level, though, what could be called narrative indeterminacy often happens in even the most linguistically determinate text; a good example of this is Robert Frost's "The Road Not Taken": there is little linguistic indeterminacy here, but the speaker's tone leads the reader to wonder if the tone is wistful or celebratory, a defeat or a triumph. To put it crudely, linguistic indeterminacy deals with *how* the text communicates, whereas narrative indeterminacy deals with *what* a text communicates (assuming, for the sake of argument, that the *what* and the *how* can ever be completely separated). In actual fact, of course, a text is rarely (if ever) completely determinate or indeterminate in either of these categories.

Throughout this dissertation, I am concerned primarily, though not completely, with linguistic indeterminacy.

> Stein criticism is haunted by the ghost of explanation. Too much of the commentary on her work starts with the premise that there is something wrong, something unintelligible, something troubling in its difficulty, something puzzling, something disturbing or deranged or missing or lacking or defective or absent or restricted or nonsensical or impossible or perverse, something enigmatic or something hidden: a puzzle that must be cracked, a code that must be deciphered, a problem that must be solved or dissolved, an inchoate phenomenon that must be theoretically psychoanalyzed; and, worst of all, a secret that must be detected. ("Professing Stein/Stein Professing"142)

Instead of trying to master Stein's texts by finding the correct interpretive decoding, Bernstein argues that readers and critics should accept her poems as texts that create their own, new systems of meaning:

> Stein's poems return us constantly, constantly return us, turn us, constituting, to where we are. No wonder it's been hard for the industrious hermeneuticist. No wonder enigma and secrets have had to be projected, to make the texts treatable—that is to locate, establish, fix their meanings outside the poems' immediate words and self-created contexts, to rob them of their maturity as sense-making and meaning-constituting. (145)

Similar new systems of meaning can be found in every indeterminate text; in fact, they are roughly equivalent to the remainder, the excess that exceeds logical, conventional, traditional (reified) understanding. What Bernstein and Reinfeld suggest is that critics dealing with indeterminate texts must intellectually engage with such texts; my emphasis on the overabundance of interpretations is my attempt to do so.

It could be argued that Reinfeld and Bernstein have vested interests in pushing for a new type of critical writing, since they are both respected indeterminate poets (such an argument, however, would seem rather biased to me; conventional lyric poets, I suspect, would not be criticized for suggesting that critics should attempt to engage their works from a perspective that tries to promote lyricism). However, the Modernist critic Maud Ellmann, in her comments on *The Waste Land*, mirrors Reinfeld's and Bernstein's opinions: "The Waste Land is a sphinx without a secret… and to force it to confession may also be a way of killing it" (91). Ellmann states that critics are often so concerned with the poem's allusions and gaps "that they have overlooked its broken images in search of the totality it might have been…. [T]hese readings treat the text as if it were a photographic negative, tracing the shadows of a lost or forbidden body" (92). This notion that critics can engage with Eliot's poem without resorting to exegesis is quite similar to Bernstein's comments on Stein criticism.[27]

A prime example of conventional criticism doing a disservice to an indeterminate text is Michael Alexander's interpretation of Pound's *Hugh Selwyn Mauberly*. While this poem is hardly Pound's best or most indeterminate (and neither is Pound the most indeterminate of poets), there is a good deal of indeterminacy in the text. However, for Alexander, there is no doubt as to the proper interpretation of the poem:

> *Hugh Selwyn Mauberly* is a sequence of 18 poems in two parts, of which the first 13 are concerned with Pound, the last 5, with his invented hedonist poetaster, Mauberly. Poem i is a funery "Ode" on E. P., the age's epitaph on the disappearing Pound; poems ii to xii are his reply to the age; "Envoi", the 13th poem is Pound's poetic riposte and farewell. Part 2 is subtitled "Mauberly (1920)", and takes this representative aesthete through the same literary world as Pound has just encountered; all Mauberly can manage is the final poem "Medallion", an

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[27] My personal experience supports Ellmann's comments. An acquaintance of mine who was, at the time, a fellow doctoral student, was a self-professed "poetry guy" who often claimed a deep appreciation for Modernist poetry; however, whenever I would state my opinion that Ezra Pound was the father of contemporary experimental poetry, my acquaintance would get angry and argue that Pound's influence on poetry was extremely detrimental. As his proof, he once pulled out a copy of Eliot's early drafts of "The Waste Land" and stated that all Pound did was unnecessarily obfuscate (and therefore lessen the effectiveness of) a great poem. My acquaintance's reasoning was quite simple: he could understand the early drafts, and he could not understand the poem after Pound revised it.

> anaesthetized version of the same experience that produced Pound's glowing "Envoi." (115)

I personally think that Alexander's interpretation is a rather reasonable one; my problem is not so much that it is inappropriate, but that it implicitly presents itself as the only worthwhile interpretation, the correct, unquestionable interpretation. Against Alexander's limiting criticism, I would champion Marjorie Perloff's comments on the same poem. Perloff summarizes some of the limiting critical opinions surrounding *Mauberly* and implicitly shows that Alexander's reading is only his opinion, of course, and so it would be better to allow for contradictory views in his article. Perloff also points out that Pound's poem contains a much more interesting area of examination than mere exegesis; she argues that *Mauberly* is often heavy with symbol after symbol, each "with an ascribed intent…. One feels that Pound begins with an idea, not with an image, and then sets about to find an objective correlative for that idea. Caliban vs Ariel, pianola vs Sappho's barbitos—all these items could be replaced by others without a real change in poetic effect" (*Poetics* 167). The result, Perloff argues, is that "The continuing controversy over the status of Mauberly (is he Pound? a persona who represents the failed aesthete? or sometimes Pound and sometimes this persona? or neither?) has obscured what seems to me much more important: that Pound was never quite at ease with the poetic materials of *Mauberly*, that he was trying too hard to compose in the Eliot mode" (169). This emphasis on the poem's form rather than on its content allows Perloff to avoid the limiting discussion of fixing the proper interpretation on the poem, all the while enabling her to offer a much more interesting (and, to me, useful) critical insight.

* * *

To turn back to my earlier distinction between critical accuracy/correctness and critical appropriateness, I have designed my project to allow the indeterminate text's remainder, as much as possible, to exist as a remainder, not as a puzzle to be solved, a problem to be overcome, or an error to be corrected. My hope is that I can allow the texts to exceed the limits of my critical inquiry (in this case, to retain their remainders is to retain an aspect of the text that exists outside—that is too large for—the boundaries of my discussions), all the while pointing to the fact that there is so much more that I could talk about with each and every one of these poems. Too often, critics focus on explaining what a text is, rather than on what possibilities a text allows the reader to encounter; I hope that I can point towards these areas of exploration without fixing them in a reified fashion in the reader's mind.

My problem with conventional criticism, as I have mentioned before, is not that I believe that what each critic says about indeterminate texts is wrong. In fact, I think that many, if not most of the critics dealing with indeterminate texts offer extremely valuable insights, but these insights far too often function as keys, as decoder rings that remove the indeterminacy from the texts as if it were an unnecessary appendage. Conventional criticism, quite frankly, attempts to wrestle the indeterminate text into a state of submission, where the critic, by having conquered the text, proves his or her own superiority; the problem is that indeterminate texts, at their ideological centres, want to avoid this game of intellectual mastery, while the critics tend to thrive on it.

I will end with one final example of conventional criticism attempting to master an indeterminate text. In this case, it is Christopher Beach writing about Duncan's *Passages* sequence. Beach states that

> Although *The Cantos* gave him the model for the form of collage, Duncan's own use of the form, particularly in the poetic sequence Passages, attempts to go beyond Pound's understanding of the collage form as a vehicle for the "reincarnation" of various themes and personae throughout the poem. Duncan's collage is a means of exploring correspondences in the universe that defy rational understanding. ("In Harmony" 166)

The problem with Beach's argument is that it is a vast simplification of Duncan's sequence. Yes, Beach's point is true, as far as it goes; I agree that Duncan's sequence does often attempt to move past (rather than "defy," with its connotations of arrogance) rational understanding. However, Beach's generalization completely discounts those numerous moments in *Passages* where Duncan directly engages the reader in rational understanding. To say that Duncan attempts to defy reason is to completely sweep aside some of the most passionate moments in the sequence, those moments where Duncan exposes the dangers of the irrational judgements of the politicians who brought about the Vietnam War. It is the sweeping generalization of Beach's comment that I object to, not the idea; it is the fact that Beach leaves no room for Duncan's work—the poems—to manoeuvre, to contradict themselves, to work in various different ways at different places. Duncan is rational, irrational, and a-rational throughout his sequence; it is his refusal to submit to any one code of thought that makes the sequence so fascinating to me. I see no reason whatsoever to try to diminish Duncan's range in the name of understanding his text.

* * *

There is one more critic I would like to acknowledge as a kindred spirit: Jerome McGann. I have only read his work recently, and so his ideas did not impact my project until it was nearly finished. However, I take great joy in reading excerpts like the following, taken from McGann's *Black Riders: The Visible Language of Modernism*:[28]

> My problem is not with Howe's work but with yours. No one builds a coherent argument by throwing together such opposite and discordant materials.
>
> True, no one does. But then not every part of an argument—even a scholarly argument—is or ought to be coherent and expository. The question is whether critical writing can find formal equivalences for its subject matter and still preserve its communicative function. Poetry is a discourse committed to the display and exploitation of contradiction. Criticism, by contrast, is an informational discourse. How do we keep criticism from murdering its subject with its pretensions to truth?
>
> Do you think it helps to bewilder the language, to confuse your reader?

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[28] McGann's choice of font size in this text is deliberate. Specifically, he alters font size in order to draw attention to his use of an imaginary inner voice that debates his points. As a result, I have maintained the changes in font size in my quotations.

> Do *you* think that "bewildering the language" and "confusing the reader" are equivalents? When that equation is made, we have abandoned all possibility of poetry.
>
> Perhaps, but not of criticism.
>
> Perhaps, but in that case you seem to leave us with only a *certain kind* of criticism: one committed to a particular idea and point of view. There are other forms—as with this dispute of ours, there is also criticism as *textus interruptus*. (101)

For me, the most exciting element of this excerpt is its form: it is a dialogue between McGann and, well, McGann. It is an example of a critic re-envisioning what critical writing can look like and do; in this case, McGann explicitly does away with the notion of singular meaning by performing an argument for his readers. Consequently, while I completely agree with his statement that

> not every part of an argument—even a scholarly argument—is or ought to be coherent and expository. The question is whether critical writing can find formal equivalences for its subject matter and still preserve its communicative function. Poetry is a discourse committed to the display and exploitation of contradiction. Criticism, by contrast, is an informational discourse. How do we keep criticism from murdering its subject with its pretensions to truth? (*Black Riders* 101)

it is important to note that McGann himself, or at least McGann's text, does not completely agree with this point. Dialogue and dissensus are parts of the critical text. This self-dialogic element, which denies the notion of a unified critical Self, continues when McGann offers several readings of a Charles Bernstein poem:

> To make a comparison between [William] Morris's texts and the accidental nonsense of [Charles Bernstein's poem] "Lift Off" is perhaps interesting, in a way, but finally outrageous. Bernstein's text looks to me like nothing more than the correction tape from an IBM Selectric typewriter. Bernstein lifts off the miscues, typos, false starts, all preserved on the white correction tape. He then

> transcribes from the tape the lifted off text. That there is no connected linguistic sense to these bits of unsaying turns the new "poem" into a concrete unsaying to be looked at like a picture, not to be read like prose. It's fun. But does it have anything to do with the agency of meaning?
>
> As if the transmission of a message were ever the principal object of art or poetry! The text is not to be "read like prose," it is to be read—exactly the way you have just been reading it! Or as I was reading it, in my thematized reimagining. Your reading has as much to do with the text's "agency of meaning" as mine, and it has the added virtue of specifying that agency in concrete technical and historical terms. In your reading Bernstein's is a mimetic text, in mine a hermeneutic one. Whatever, poetry pursues its truth-functions by revealing agencies of meaning and by implicating the reader in the processes of revelation. (*Black Riders* 111)

All this critical play works towards creating what McGann calls "radial reading": "The elementary sign of radial reading is probably illustrated by a person who rises from reading a book in order to look up the meaning of a word in a dictionary or to check some historical or geographical reference" (116). McGann argues that radial reading denies the passive reading of what I would call a strong narrative suture by pushing the reader outside the text (119-20); according to McGann, the critical edition is the best example of a text that foregrounds radial reading (its notes, appendices, glosses, etc., all break the linear drive of reading) (120-21). However, I would argue that McGann's texts, when they perform a self-dialogue, are already creating radial reading because they push the reader outside the text's monologic argument. This is what my project also attempts to do; by offering many disparate thoughts on the indeterminate poem, it asks the reader to decide for her/himself which thoughts s/he will make use of. I view my project as a sort of critical introduction to the texts I am writing about. It will hopefully perform the same task as McGann's teacher:

> When we teach reading in our classrooms, we typically stand to our students in much the same relation that the critical edition stands to us when we read (for example) *Ulysses*. That is to say, we try to structure the reading field in order to encourage students to free themselves from the tyranny of the immediate and the linear text. Good readers have to read both linearly and spatially, but both of those operations remain closely tied to the illusion of textual immediacy. Radial reading is the most advanced, the most difficult, and the most important form of reading because radial reading alone puts one is a position to respond actively to the text's own (often secretive) discursive acts. (122)

In McGann's terms, I want my project to force the reader to engage with the poems as radial texts, and to provide as many jumping off points as possible. To encourage radial reading does not deny the text's meaning; it merely points out that there are as many meanings as there are readers, and that each of these readers will her/himself change according to place, time, background, knowledge, etc.; consequently, radial reading explodes the notion of an essential, transhistorical, unchanging Meaning embedded in the text.

3. An Afterword, Beforehand

Monday, October 18, 2004

Looking back on a project that has consumed the better part of most of my days for almost exactly the past year, I have gained some perspective on its successes and failures. Perhaps most easily dealt with are the successes. Most importantly, the project has been finished—thus answering a question I've had in the back of my head for several years: can I write a dissertation? I can at least place the amount of discipline such a project calls for (and here I mean all dissertations, regardless of their form) in the win column. If only everything aspect of the project were so easily determined; I'm afraid that, for the most part, I'm too close to the project to accurately judge it. Still, here goes.

I firmly believe that the principles underlying the form of the project (anarchy, indeterminacy, vitality, etc.) hold true. I also still firmly believe in the necessity for academic criticism dealing with indeterminate texts to allow for process criticism/anarchic criticism/grotesque criticism (any of these terms is appropriate) in order to avoid reifying and determining the texts. I still believe that the critic best deals with the indeterminate text when s/he does not attempt to solve the questions and problems that it gives rise to. I also believe that my project has, for the most part, avoided this urge to solve; however, at the same time, I must admit that I'm worried about how often I've succumbed to scratching that itch. In the end, I cannot say that I have truly succeeded in opening the texts up rather than limiting them; that is something that other people will have to decide.

I do have a number of questions about the choices I made when writing the project. Perhaps unsurprisingly, these questions are often in regards to formal elements. I am, for instance, uncertain about the practice of dating each entry, since the dates bring linearity: do the entries necessarily create a chronological hierarchy, a kind of *post hoc ergo propter hoc*, where readers will intentionally or unintentionally supply a linear, logical framework to the project due to its chronological presentation; or will readers privilege later entries because it is traditional to view later thoughts as more correct, more experienced. I gave serious thought to changing my dating practice in each chapter (as I did, for example, in the chapter on Cage, where I have used aleatory means to reorder the dated entries), which I thought might provide the change to the pattern necessary to retain some formal indeterminacy. However, in the end I have left the dates in, and, except for the Cage chapter, in chronological order—but not without some hesitancy.

I also have doubts about the actual content of the project. Are the entries too scattered for the reader to find them helpful? Or are the individual entries too linear, thereby overcoming my desire to present an a-hierarchical series of thoughts and investigations? There are, after all, interpretations and opinions presented in the project that I personally believe to be more accurate than others; does this personal bias come through, either implicitly or even explicitly? Is it possible to write so much about a text without personal biases and opinions becoming obvious? The fact that I believe the critic should expose personal biases whenever possible does not completely overcome my fear that exposing these biases might actually make them stronger by fully articulating them.

In terms of failures, there is a one overarching failure that I have felt throughout my work on this project: I have been unable or unintentionally unwilling (I can't determine which, nor can I completely separate the two possibilities) to communicate the true joy that I feel when I encounter these six indeterminate texts. For reasons that I don't fully understand, I found it much easier to point out the aspects of these texts that fail to achieve what they implicitly or explicitly set out to accomplish; in other words, I have found it much easier to write about the texts' significant shortcomings rather than their tremendous achievements and successes. The result is that I have often felt that I am dourly chastising these texts for not being *better* indeterminate texts. In response to this, I would first off like to explain that these texts, along with many other indeterminate texts, bring me great joys, and that these joys are primarily derived from the challenges posed by their indeterminate aspects. My project would not be concerned with maintaining this indeterminacy if I did not feel it extremely worthwhile and also extremely enjoyable.

However, the fact remains that I often rap the texts' knuckles for failing to achieve something more. Because of this fact, I would like to explain why I find it difficult and rather dangerous in my project to deal with the texts' moments of joyous indeterminacy. Avoiding openly discussing the moments of indeterminacy maintains in the fullest possible fashion the indeterminacy: to offer ideas or theories on the indeterminacy is to start to take aim at it and, consequently, to start to tame it. In this sense, keeping what Reinfeld refers to as the text's remainder as just that—an excess, something that exceeds discussion—keeps the excess as excessive (or keeps the sublime sublime, so to speak).

To theorize about what indeterminacy is in a general sense, I would like to turn to Jean-François Lyotard's thoughts on realism. According to Lyotard, realism is intimately entwined with stabilizing identity; as he states,

> The challenge lay essentially in that photographic and cinematographic processes can accomplish better, faster, and with a circulation a hundred thousand times larger than narrative or pictorial realism, the task which academicism has assigned to realism: to preserve various consciousnesses from doubt. Industrial photography and cinema will be superior to painting and the novel whenever the objective is to stabilize the referent, to arrange it according to a point of view which endows it with a recognizable meaning, to reproduce the syntax and vocabulary which enable the addressee to decipher images and sequences quickly, and so to arrive easily at the consciousness of his own identity.... ("Answering" 40)

For Lyotard, then, realism stabilizes identity by stabilizing and naturalizing the various systems of meaning that people often tend to believe are nothing more than objective reality; realism makes the subjective appear to be objective, or, as Lyotard states elsewhere, realism provides the solace of good forms.[29] What an indeterminate text tries to point out is the artificiality of these codes; indeterminacy points out just how subjective (and consequently how arbitrary) the systems that compose what society considers "reality" to be truly are. Indeterminate texts show those metanarratives that realism implies are Truths (religion, science, language, etc.) to be nothing more than historical, subjective, artificial codes that people knowingly or usually unknowingly believe to be transhistorical and objective. To try to bring the challenges of an indeterminate text within the framework of the metanarratives it wants to dislodge is, in my opinion, to necessarily seek to limit or do away with those challenges; this action reaffirms the objective status of the metanarratives.

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[29] Peter Bürger makes a similar argument in his book *Theory of the Avant-Garde*. Bürger states that

> Art allows at least an imagined satisfaction of individual needs that are repressed in daily praxis. Through the enjoyment of art, the atrophied bourgeois individual can experience the self as personality. But because art is detached from daily life, this experience remains without tangible effect, ie, it cannot be integrated into that life. The lack of tangible effect is not the same as functionless... but characterizes a specific function of art in bourgeois society: the neutralization of critique. This neutralization of impulses to change society is thus closely related to the role art plays in the development of bourgeois subjectivity. (13)

Bürger's discussion of non-Avant-Garde art is roughly equivalent to Lyotard's thoughts on artistic realism: both believe that this form of art reifies and stabilizes subjectivity.

This argument might be made more clear by turning to Lyotard's notion of Postmodern and Modern texts. For Lyotard, somewhat counter intuitively, the Postmodern always precedes the Modern:

> What then is the postmodern?... It is undoubtedly a part of the modern. All that has been received, if only yesterday (*modo, modo*, Petronius used to say), must be suspected. What space does Cezanne challenge? The Impressionists'. What objects do Picasso and Braque attack? Cezanne's. What presupposition does Duchamp break with in 1912? That which says one must make a painting, be it cubist. And Buren questions that other presupposition which he believes had survived untouched by the work of Duchamp: the place of presentation of the work. In an amazing acceleration, the generations precipitate themselves. A work can become modern only if it is first postmodern. Postmodernism thus understood is not modernism at its end but in the nascent state, and this state is constant. ("Answering" 44)

A text, Lyotard argues, first challenges the artistic, representative codes that have come before it, and then the new codes that it offers become the standard codes of representation. Realism, then, is constantly being challenged and constantly adapts itself to include those challenges. Another way of looking at this process is that indeterminate texts attack the reified, accepted codes of realism; then, over time, the indeterminate codes become normalized, and they become the reified codes of a new realism. Lyotard explains this process in these terms:

> The postmodern would be that which, in the modern, puts forward the unpresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable; that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unpresentable. A postmodern artist or writer is in

> the position of a philosopher: the text he writes, the work he produces are not in principle governed by preestablished rules, and they cannot be judged according to a determining judgment, by applying familiar categories to the text or to the work. Those rules and categories are what the work of art itself is looking for. The artist and the writer, then, are working without rules in order to formulate the rules of what *will have been done*. Hence the fact that work and text have the characters of an *event*; hence, also, they always come too late for their author, or, what amounts to the same thing, their being put into work, their realization [*mise en oeuvre*] always begin too soon. *Post modern* would have to be understood according to the paradox of the future [*post*] anterior [*modo*]. ("Answering" 46)

Lyotard's use of the term *postmodern* (which for him is a transhistorical term that does not apply to any particular time period or artistic movement) is roughly equivalent to my use of *indeterminate*, in that both usages focus on the breaking down of reified codes of representation. Where Lyotard and I disagree is that he sees the movement of a text from Postmodern to Modern as somewhat natural and inevitable: texts, for him, create the codes by which they will be judged. However, in my opinion, this transformation from upstart challenger to respected conformist is not inevitable.[30] I have intended the design of my entire project to at least delay this transformation, if not postpone it indefinitely, for the six texts I look at. The critic's role in the process of transformation is extremely important and somewhat overlooked by Lyotard. It is, after all, the critics who interpret the new, challenging Postmodern/indeterminate texts, who, then, make these challenges understandable and logical; it is the critics who bring about the change from Postmodern to Modern, from challenging to accepted, from vital to reified, by explaining away the texts' elements of indeterminacy. The critic who tries to explain the indeterminate text, especially with the intention of gaining a larger audience for that text, is really the agent of recuperation.

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[30] To be fair, Lyotard generally deals with texts that are more accurately described as challenging or radical, and not with texts that are truly indeterminate. The difference is rather small, but important. The truly indeterminate text, in my opinion, must want to change more than just a reified style of art; it must want to change the ideology of the culture that created the reified style of art. This distinction is, of course, hazy at best and impossible to define objectively.

How can the critic discuss indeterminate texts without merely recuperating them? One way is through silence, by avoiding discussion of the indeterminate aspects of these texts.[31] However, another way to avoid recuperating these texts without resorting to silence is, in my opinion, to rely on an overabundance of speech, and overabundance of explanation. While I am uncertain whether or not I have been able to rely on this overabundance throughout my project, I hope that the mixture of silence and overexplanation have allowed me to thoughtfully discuss these six texts without limiting their indeterminacies.

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[31] This silence is implicitly supported by a critic such as Paul Mann, who believes that any marginal/avant-garde text is merely a tool to recuperate the margin into the center. Mann goes so far as to refer to the avant-garde as the "avant-colony."

Chapter One

"the white experience between the words": Steve McCaffery's *Carnival, the second panel: 1970-75*

Monday, November 17, 2003

In the introduction to *The Second Panel*, Steve McCaffery states that "It [*Carnival*] is language presented as direct physical impact, constructed as a peak, at first to stand on and look down from the privilege of its distance onto language as something separate from you.... The panel when 'seen' is 'all language at a distance'..." (n. pag.). In this sense, McCaffery is still deeply engaged with the ideas of Visual Poetry. Dick Higgins argues that

> As soon as the visual aspect of a poem becomes not just incidental but is actually structural, the strategy of a poem is affected in several ways: (1) the momentum of a linear thrust is broken, since the eye must stop and take note of the shape. A static element is thereby introduced. (2) The idea of the work is less exclusively dependent upon the words of the text and can even become somewhat transcendent to the verbal text. (3) In the case of visual poems which are primarily visual and only lesserly textual—the verbally poetic visual piece—a similar metamorphosis occurs: the verbal aspect becomes transcendent to its visual embodiment, and a kinetic thrust becomes possible in a way that very few visual art works can have. (29)

Meaning, according to Higgins, does not lie in the words alone. The negotiation of meaning—or, more precisely, meanings—in a poem like *Carnival* lies in the reader/viewer's negotiation of both textual and visual elements. This seems like a simple point, but the visual element of the text is often denied by traditional poetry, where the black marks on white page are translated by the mind into the reality of the words' denotative and connotative meanings.

What I would suggest from all this is that McCaffery uses these visual elements in a way that disrupts the somewhat easy delineations people such as Higgins try to place on visual poetry. Is *Carnival* primarily a textual piece with visual elements, or vice-versa? I think the question is irrelevant in regards to the larger concerns of the text.

McCaffery also states in the introduction to *The Second Panel* that "**Carnival** is also a peak to descend from **into** language… the panel when read is entered, and offers the reader the experience of non-narrative language" (n. pag.). *Carnival* is both an attempt to deny the visual linearity of language as well as the logical, or semantic, linearity of language; just as the reader cannot physically read the text in a straight line, so must she also forego trying to make linear *sense* of the text. *Carnival* does not follow the strict either/or definitions that Higgins' comments imply work for Visual poetry; McCaffery's poem is neither primarily visual nor primarily textual; instead, it attempts to exist in an uncomfortable both/and space, equally visual and textual. Along these lines, it is limiting to refer to *Carnival* as either a book or as a panel, since it is simultaneously both at the same time (I would argue that this is the case no matter what the physical state of the text is: as a book, the piece demands to be thought of as a panel; likewise, as an assembled panel, the piece maintains its *bookness* through the fact that it is so obviously a destroyed/disassembled book). Likewise, *Carnival* is simultaneously kinetic and static, contains depth and is flat (in the sense that it exists as both a two-dimensional panel and as a three-dimensional book), trusts signification and denies the truth of signification.

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January 6, 2005[32]

Perhaps another way to think of this point is to suggest that McCaffery's text points out that there is a (n often overlooked) visual aspect present in all poetry, as Jerome McGann argues:

> To read Blake's illuminated poems, or any newspaper, is to be reminded of the crucial importance which spatial relations play in the structure of texts. Texts printed in a newspaper have a spatial structure very different from texts printed in a book, or even in a magazine. The

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[32] In order to highlight the ongoing nature of my project, I have placed any new thoughts I have added to the original chapter in a different font (Arial 11pt, to be precise). My intention in so doing is to acknowledge the evolving nature of my responses to an indeterminate text such as McCaffery's *The Second Panel*.

> differences are important because they involve semiotic codes which readers will decipher—more or less fully, and whether consciously or not. Such differences are clear to us if, for example, we think of reading a text (say a poem) in a typescript or a manuscript, and reading the same text in a printed and published format. The physical space occupied by the text is, in each case, very different and calls out correspondingly different modes of reading.
>
> The reading eye does not move only in a linear direction. Blake's works are particularly useful for reminding us that the reading eye is a scanning mechanism as well as a linear decoder.... But all poetry, even in its most traditional forms, asks the reader to decipher the text in spatial as well as linear terms. Stanzaic and generic forms, rhyme schemes, metrical orders: all of these deploy spatial function in scripted texts, as their own roots in oral poetry's "visual" arts of memory should remind us. Even the prose poem communicates through its spatial arrangement. When the prose poem artfully reintroduces a purely linear appearance into the text, it paradoxically heightens our sense of the spatial form of the work. Consciously or not, readers of prose poems recognize and decode that spatiality. (*Textual Condition* 113)

The Second Panel merely emphasizes the visual element of poetry; consequently, it might not be that McCaffery's poem is primarily both visual and textual. In fact, McGann's comments suggest that it is difficult, if not impossible, to separate these elements in any form of poetry.

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McCaffery states in the introduction that "The roots of Carnival go beyond concretism... to labyrinth and mandala, and all related archetypal forms that emphasize the use of the visual qualities in language to defend a sacred centre" (n. pag.). At the same time as he was working on *The Second Panel*, McCaffery also created the text *Broken Mandala* (Ganglia Press, 1974), which is a series of partial circles that he comprised by stamping a repeated phrase in a circular fashion. The stamped circles that occur throughout *The Second Panel* are also mandalas.

From the Oxford English Dictionary:
mandala. a. A symbolic circular figure, usually with symmetrical divisions and figures of deities, etc., in the centre, used in Buddhism and other religions as a representation of the universe, and serving esp. as an object of meditation. b. In Jungian psychology: an image or archetype ... of a similar circle visualized in dreams, held to symbolize a striving for unity of self and completeness.

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A mandala is a representation of the universe; the mandalas in the text are composed of words:

- the universe is linguistic: language creates the universe, literally, in the text, as the spinning of a stamp of words creates the mandalas.
- language is the primary matter of the universe, as letters trail out of the mandalas in chains that connect the universes/mandalas together.
- as we are linguistic creatures, we understand the universe through language; or, to put it another way, language shapes our understanding of the universe, because we are linguistic creatures.
- language, because we are linguistic creatures, constitutes our universe; there is nothing outside language, because we are linguistic creatures.
- as linguistic creatures, we are made of language, as is everything we encounter in the universe, since we can only think, can only relate to the universe, in terms of language.
- the textual universe of the poem is known only through language.
- the textual universe of people, including ourselves, is known to us only through language.
- the universe of language is not complete; the mandalas are often broken.
- language is not a way of knowing the entire universe, since the universe is something that cannot be fully contained within a linguistic mandala.
- the universe is so much more than can be contained within language.
- language obscures the real universe from us; while we are trapped within a linguistic universe, so much that exists outside of our linguistic constructions

goes unnoticed.

- language is a poetic universe.
- language is an eye that watches.
- the eye learns from language what to watch.
- language, like a mandala, circles in on itself; sometimes there are mental leaps when the mind breaks out of a linguistic mandala and into the external world.
- the linguistic universe and the physical universe are separate but intricately interwoven.
- a mandala is a representation of the universe; the mandalas in the text are composed of words.

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A mandala, in Jungian psychology, symbolizes a striving for unity of self and completeness. Language, stamped phrases spun in circles, composes the mandalas in *Carnival*:

- the self is complete within language.
- the self is broken and incomplete within language.
- the self is complete outside of language.
- the self is broken and incomplete outside of language.
- language forces the self to focus its attention on itself; the self as solipsism.
- language breaks into our focus on ourselves and forces us to encounter the Other.
- the self is so much more than language.
- language is so much more than any one self.
- no exchange required on cheques.

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Wednesday, November 19, 2003

McCaffery points out that one of the definitions of *panel* he had in mind was "Any flat surface with a meaning" (*The Second Panel*, Introduction). The notion of flat surfaces, of a surface without depth, brings in Fredric Jameson's thoughts on the depthlessness of postmodern art and life. Jameson argues that postmodernity is marked by its lack of psychological, historical, and physical depth; subjectivity, signification, time, space—all have been *flattened* in the postmodern world. The result of this lack of depth is that

> this latest mutation in space. . . has finally succeeded in transcending the capacities of the individual human body to locate itself, to organize its immediate surroundings perceptually, and cognitively to map its position in a mappable external world. And I have already suggested that this alarming disjunction point between body and its built environment. . . can itself stand as the symbol and analogue of the even sharper dilemma which is the incapacity of our minds, at least at present, to map the great global multinational and decentred communicational network in which we find ourselves caught as individual subjects. (83)

In Jameson's opinion, then, the lack of depth found in postmodern life leaves the individual disoriented, and it is this disorientation that capitalism exploits in order to drive itself forward without any opposition from people or persons. It is the amorphous nature of capitalism that allows it to grow unchecked, since it is literally and figuratively unmappable.

Given that many of McCaffery's opinions critiques of capitalism and consumer culture are often very similar to those offered by Marxism, how can one reconcile McCaffery's stated beliefs and intentions with *Carnival*, a text that seemingly promotes the depthlessness required by capitalism? I think there are two possibilities:

1.) McCaffery as prophet. McCaffery focuses in the introduction of *The Second Panel* on the text as labyrinth, specifically as an unmappable, unknowable place. The reader can loon on the mandalas, the circles of text, as moments where language spins in on itself, creating its own solipsism. Along these lines, *The Second Panel* could be an early attempt to point out to the reader the depthless, unmappable nature of life in the postmodern era. McCaffery's text could be seen as a poetic forerunner to Jameson's arguments (*The Second Panel* predates Jameson's *Postmodernism, or The Cultural*

Logic of Late Capitalism by more than a decade). Perhaps even more interestingly, Jameson's attitude towards this depthlessness is relentlessly negative, while McCaffery's attitude seems very positive.

2.) McCaffery as political postmodernist. Jameson himself lays out what he sees as the role of the political artist in the postmodern era:

> the new political art—if it is indeed possible at all—will have to hold to the truth of postmodernism, that is to say, to its fundamental object—the world space of multinational capital—at the same time at which it achieves a breakthrough to some as yet unimaginable new mode of representing this last, in which we may again begin to grasp our positioning as individual and collective subjects and regain a capacity to act and struggle which is at present neutralized by our spatial as well as our social confusion. The political form of postmodernism, if there is any, will have as its vocation the invention and projection of a global cognitive mapping, on a social as well as a spatial scale. (92)

I would suggest that the reader could view *The Second Panel* as the type of political art that Jameson calls for. Specifically, as Marjorie Perloff notes, *The Second Panel* is a "cartographic exercise" ("Inner Tension/ In Attention" 267). In the attempt to provide a cartographic representation of the subject's life in the postmodern world, *The Second Panel* begins a dialogue on what Jameson refers to as *cognitive mapping*: "a pedagogical political culture which seeks to endow the individual subject with some new heightened sense of its place in the global system..." (90). The reader can view *The Second Panel*, in its labyrinthine way, as a mapping of language and language games. The form implicitly asks for a new way of reading and/or interpreting language, both on and off the page. It is no longer possible for readers to take language for granted as an area that exists innocently outside capitalism. As McCaffery has argued in his essay "Language Writing: from Productive to Libidinal Economy,"

> The referential fetish in language is inseparable from the representational theory of the sign. Proposed as intentional, as always "about" some

> extra-linguistic thing, language must always refer beyond itself to a corresponding reality. The linguistic task is not to draw in and centre a productive activity within itself, but to fulfill a deictic function that points beyond itself to an exterior goal. The referential fetish thrives on the myth of *transparent signification*, on words as innocent, unproblematic sign-posts to a monological message or intention; it wants a message as a product to be consumed with as little attention as possible drawn to the words' dialectical engagements. (152)

Signification, McCaffery argues, is itself an agent of capitalism, since it implants in the individual a belief that consumption is natural, something that *just happens*, instead of something driven by hidden engines. In this sense, *The Second Panel* exposes the role language plays in capitalism, as well as takes a first step at proposing a cognitive mapping of a language outside capitalism. Contrary to Jameson's distrust of all things depthless, McCaffery's panel suggests that the turn away from reference and towards a depthless text can provide a way to begin a cognitive mapping of the individual in the postmodern era. In this sense, McCaffery offers a suggestion on how to live within a postmodern world, whereas Jameson implicitly desires a way to revert back to a pre-postmodern world.

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The lack of depth, implied by a panel that does not signify, also implies for Jameson the death of the subject, the death of individual style. Postmodernism's attack on modernism's belief in the "autonomous bourgeois monad or ego or individual" signals a fragmentation of the subject (Jameson 71). This fragmentation of the subject, in turn, brings with it "the end... of style, in the sense of the unique and personal, the end of the distinctive individual brushstroke" (72). In other words, the postmodern text works to deny the grand personal subjectivity found in Modernist texts such as Pound's *Cantos* and Picasso's canvasses.

Furthermore, *The Second Panel* also works to deny the individual subject through its refusal to locate any individual speaking subject. McCaffery states in the introduction that "Language units are placed in visible conflict, in patterns of defective messages, creating a semantic texture by shaping an interference within the clear line of statement" (n. pag.). *The Second Panel*'s constant resort to quotation from uncited texts fractures the speaking subject even moreso; what the reader is left with is a collage of voices, often speaking over each other in print, none of whom can we locate (not only can we not locate the author-speaker of the quotations—we also cannot locate even the forum or style of text the pieces were taken from). All this works to deny the notion of the individual speaking subject; instead, the text, by using language spoken by other people, leaves the reader to confront the text's fractured subject. In this sense, speech itself creates the speaking subject of *The Second Panel*, as opposed to the more common formula, in which the subject creates speech.[33]

However, I would argue that *The Second Panel* is also a virtuoso piece of work, and, in its own way, is as much a tour-de-force of the creative mind as the works of Pound, Joyce, etc. At every moment, the reader realizes that the entire text has been carefully, intricately shaped by Steve McCaffery, author. The form of the text is too heavily crafted, too individually *stylized* to ever hide the work its creator's hand.

It seems that content and form are at odds in relation to subjectivity. The content, through its resort to quotation, over-strike, collage, works to undo unified subjectivity, just as Jameson argues postmodern texts do. However, the form of the text displays the creator's effort and work, his style, and consequently argues for the author's unified subjectivity (by which I mean that the text's Author, announced on the cover as "Steve McCaffery," appears as a unified subjectivity, not Steve McCaffery, person).

For these reasons, *The Second Panel* is a text with depthless depth, or a surface with depth. It sits uneasily between its postmodern content and its modernist form.

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[33] Nicole Markotic, in a conversation with me, pointed out that the idea of a fractured subject implies the notion that the subject was once whole (ie, how can something be broken unless it was not broken before). I had not thought of the term in this way, as carrying the trace of a prior unity. As I see it, the postmodern self (I can't speak to earlier times periods) has never been unified, but the systems of capitalism, consumerism, democracy, etc., constantly bombard the individual with fictional instances of unified subjectivity (quite often linked to the purchase of a product, which, even if it is a physical product, is really offering a sense of satisfaction and a belief in belonging to a contented community). In this sense, the postmodern subject has never been unified, but individuals are made to feel the absence of a unified subjectivity as a lack (a lack that is, in actuality, necessarily insatiable in order for these systems to continue to thrive).

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Friday, November 21, 2003

> CARNIVAL from Med. L. carnelevale, a putting away of the flesh and hence a prelental language game in which all traces of the subjective 'I' are excommunicated. In this way to consider the sheer weight of linguistic presence in our lives and to confront it as material without reference to an author or to any otherness. As such, it constitutes a call that is a fleshless call to language out of language, a call we enter as components to become a part of that macro-syntax. (*The Second Panel* Introduction)

McCaffery writes *Carnival* as an attack on the unified subjectivity of both author and reader. The argument is that language exists outside people, that language constitutes our reality, as opposed to the argument that language is merely a tool that we use to describe the "real" world. In this sense, McCaffery is deeply concerned with what would soon be called Language Writing, and it is a mistake to look on *Carnival* as primarily a visual poem. The visual elements of the poem work to disrupt the linear drive of traditional writing, where the reading eye/I is hypnotized by the left-to-right pull of the text. It is impossible to follow this left-to-right reading in *Carnival*, whether in book or panel form. In book form, the right margin of the page denies the drive to read horizontally, a drive that the text implies the reader should follow, uninterruptedly, to the missing adjacent page to its right. Since the textually adjacent page is not attached to the right hand margin of the page that precedes it (for example, left hand margin of the second page is not attached to the right hand margin of the first page), the reader must make a decision: do I read on to the following page (and thus disrupt the sacred boundary of the textual page), or do I read the page as a unit (and thus disrupt the horizontal reading, which remains as a ghost, a trace, even when not followed). The problem, or as McCaffery might put it, the solution to the problem, is that there is no one correct reading practice; *The Second Panel* equally validates the page as unit and the horizontal reading thrust, which necessarily also means that both equally invalidate the other. By making the reader choose, the text displays for the reader the arbitrary nature of the path he or she chooses to take through *Carnival*.

January 7, 2005

As Jerome McGann's work makes clear, these concerns deal with the bibliographic code of McCaffery's text. The bibliographic code consists basically of the non-linguistic elements of the text: the paper, the font, the physical book's shape, the binding, the spatial layout of text on a page, etc. McGann argues that

> In the case of the bibliographical codes, "author's intentions" rarely control the state or the transmission of the text. In this sense literary texts and their meanings are collaborative events. Some writers enter these collaborations actively and positively—one thinks, for example, of the books of Jack Spicer's poetry, whose physical appearance is so central to their textual meanings. In other cases the collaborations are unsought for, or perhaps even positively resisted.... Because editors tend to theorize their texts within "authorial intentional" modes, however, these more complex aspects of textuality are not foregrounded in their work (i.e., in their editions). (*Textual Condition* 60)

The differences that exist in each copy of *The Second Panel* (different copies appear to have cut the pages at slightly different spots, for example) are proof of non-authorial indeterminacy (in this case, the mechanical nature of book production introduces the indeterminacy) creeping into the text. This bibliographic indeterminacy, moreover, leads to a larger point: no one copy of a text such as *The Second Panel* is the *correct* copy, since each copy, in spite of its variances from other copies, is, in itself, correct. McCaffery's text draws attention to this aspect of book production, an aspect that McGann argues exists in all texts:

> no single editorial procedure—no single "text" of a particular work—can be imagined or hypothesized as the "correct" one, that there are many mansions in the house of editorial choices. The indeterminacy of the textual situation fluctuates in relation to the size and complexity of the surviving body of textual materials: the larger the archive, the greater the room for indeterminacy. And it must be understood that the archive includes not just original manuscripts, proofs, and editions, but all the subsequent textual constitutions which the work undergoes in its historical passages. (*Textual Condition* 62)

What *The Second Panel* does, through the small variances between copies, is highlight the process of change that normally occurs over a much larger period of time.

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Carnival is an untranslatable text. By this, I mean that not only is it impossible to truly translate *Carnival* into another language (all texts are, to a greater or lesser degree, untranslatable in this sense) so that someone who cannot read English may read it, but that the text remains outside the English reader's mind, due to its unparaphraseable nature. The work always maintains what Linda Reinfeld calls a remainder: "To read the indeterminate text is to enable, to envision, to demystify. At the same time there is no sense in which the text permits us to decide that we are in our readings finally right. There is always something left over, something unaccounted for; a remnant, a remainder, it sticks, it cannot be articulated" (20-1). It is this ghostly trace, and the unfixability it lends to the entire text, that keeps the reader from truly translating *The Second Panel*, which, in turn, keeps the reader from being able to paraphrase the text into his own words and ideas.

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The use of two different colours of type, red and black, introduces the notion of depth to the panel. Along with the constant and rather severe use of overstrike, the two colours offer two different visual planes to the reader/viewer, since the black type often obscures the red type, making the red type appear to be on a plane farther away from the reader than the black type. This use of multiple planes helps to strengthen the feeling of polyphony in the text, as the black text repeatedly interrupts or talks over the red text.

Furthermore, the black text plane is often in conflict with itself, due to the use of stamped text of different sizes and boldness. For example, on the third page, the stamped letters "E," "F," and "U" appear in a much larger font size than the typewritten text announcing the presence of "balloons" and "moons." On top of this, the stamped letter "C" appears in two different forms: the hollow "C" chain in the bottom left corner, as well as the solid "C"s that are in a font-size larger than any other on the page. This textual polyphony denies the possibility of certainty for the reader: should the reader treat all the letters as on the same plane, and therefore in immediate relation to each other? does the different size of the letters suggest that some are *closer* to the reader than others? is the reader to equate size with loudness, as we often do with capitalized text in poetry, and see some letters as louder or softer than others? do the letters exist in a multiplicity of planes, which means that, like the stars in the night sky, it is only because the reader views them from one vantage point that they seem to relate to each other at all?

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Is it possible to look at *Carnival* as an example of what I would describe as celestial cartography? What I mean by this is if the reader looks at the text as a map, as a rendition in two dimensions of something that exists in three or more dimensions, does the presence of mandalas—symbols of the universe—suggest that it is fair to see the constructed panel as an attempt to render deep space on the page? In a more visual interpretation, the circles of stamped text appear galaxy- or nebula-like, especially in the way that textual matter spins out of one only to eventually drift into another. Is it possible, then, to see *Carnival* as an example of a textual time-lapse mapping of the universe?

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The first page of the text invites/commands us to "plunge" into *Carnival*, like Alice falling down the rabbit hole. This fall into language offers a variety of interpretations:

- a fall from grace, from an edenic area outside language (suggested by the area of blank, untouched nothingness in the upper left-hand corner) into the corrupted world of language. Along these lines, it is possible that the plunge into the linguistic world is a moment of figurative birth.
- an attempt to dive into the materiality of language, to explore the physical nature of words and the way that they shape our experience of the world.
- a diving into the multiple linguistic planes of the text, as a call to see the panel not as flat but as a two-dimensional representation of three-dimensional linguistic planes.
- a request that the reader/viewer immerse herself in the Panel. This carries with it the possible request to surrender to the text, to let the text wash over the reader

without the need to interpret it; to experience the text, as opposed to attempt to logically understand the text.

- take the plunge! Leave preconceived notions about poetry behind.
- a reconfiguration of language is required, specifically in order to engage with *Carnival*, but also in order to engage with those non-linguistic texts life in general offers. The reader should note that "plunge" is stamped onto the page, and that the word itself is a reconfiguration of language: the "n" in plunge is, on closer inspection, not really an "n" at all, but an upside-down "u."

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McCaffery's use of stamps in *Carnival* is complicated: it is, at one and the same time, a rather mechanical operation—the human hand does not inscribe the letter, but uses a tool to do so. At the same time, his use of stamps stands out in relation to the typed text, which hides any notion of the human hand whatsoever—type, I would argue, through its mechanical, impersonal duplication of the same marks over and over again, erases the human nature of the writer who has created the text. In this sense, the use of stamps, specifically the idiosyncratic use of stamps, forces the reader to take note of McCaffery's presence as writer; unlike type, it is impossible to overlook that a human hand guided these intentionally non-perfect markings. McCaffery literally stamps his presence onto the text.

January 7, 2005

In his written response to this passage, Michael O'Driscoll comments that "I disagree that type and stamps are in any way inhuman, or erase the presence of the guiding human hand. Indeed, both type and stamps can be, are, crafted by human hands; however, because the labour that produces typewriters, stamp machines, computers is abstracted and commodified, we lose sight of that. Perhaps [McCaffery's] panel reminds us of that on many levels, not just by way of the idiosyncrasy of stamping." This is a good point, and I am inclined to agree with it; however, I believe that there is a distinct bibliographic distinction between how type and stamp work in *The Second Panel*. Most books condition readers to overlook type, to see type as the *natural* element for published writing; stamps, however, draw the reader's attention to the existence of type as type. In this sense, McCaffery's use of stamps performs a similar function to that of the Chinese characters in Pound's *Cantos*, about which McGann states that

> the Chinese characters appear before our eyes with all the ideographic force that Pound, following Ernest Fenellosa, had discovered in them. They work this way because the characters are so unfamiliar to us.... If Pound's Chinese characters invoke the entire apparatus of Pound's Fenellosan approach to such materials, that conceptual framework only serves to focus our attention on the immediate text's smallest particularities. English and other Euro-American languages are the large field into which Pound has introduced his Chinese characters, but it is the latter which throw the details of that larger field into an entirely new perspective. To put it as simply as possible: the Chinese characters are an index of the kind of attention all scripted forms demand, even—and perhaps most crucially—those forms which are most familiar to us, such as the forms of our own languages. (*Textual Condition* 145-46)

The stamps draw the reader's attention to the constructed nature of type, denaturalizing it and consequently allowing the reader to see type as yet another constructed element that also works to secretly construct meaning.

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Monday, November 24, 2003

What is the relationship between *The Second Panel* and its front and back covers? If I consider *The Second Panel* as an anti-book, as a visual poem that must be removed from its book-nature and then reassembled as panel, then the covers (which do not form part of the constructed panel) are nothing more than effluence, discarded elements that are not part of the text and have no justifiable relationship to the *real* text. If, however, *The Second Panel* is a book, then its covers have a very real relationship to the text, but still a rather ambiguous one: they are excess, remainder, but they also serve to introduce the Panel proper, and as such they metonymically summarize the entire text contained between them.

Perhaps the ambivalence of the covers has something to do with the role covers play in capitalism. In spite of the well-known injunction to not judge a book by its covers, the cover offers to the possible buyer an implicit summary of the spirit of the content it contains. At once physically part of the book, but not part of the text, the cover, more than any other aspect, marks both the book and the text as part of consumer capitalism; the cover announces that the text is available for purchase, and it also suggests that the text desires to be purchased. Therefore, although the text of *The Second Panel* offers a criticism of consumer capitalism (through its attacks on unified subjectivity, on signification, on linearity, on the reader's desire to master and thus to truly *own* the text), the covers (which include the price tag for each individual copy) announce that the text is, indeed, available to be purchased. Not only that, but the back cover proudly announces that "The First Panel of **Carnival** can still be obtained for $2.50 from the Coach House Press," after explaining the cultural capital that the First Panel has obtained: "Panel 1 was received with great excitement in international poetry circles when it first appeared. It was chosen as the centrepiece for an exhibition of typewriter art (covering the last hundred years) in Edinburgh and included in other exhibitions in Bologna, Italy and Toronto. A section of Panel 1 also appeared in **Typewriter Art**, an anthology by Alan Riddell published in 1975." The cover, with its traditionally enthusiastic summary, not only announces the importance of *The Second Panel*; it seeks to create a desire to purchase Panel One as well. The cover instils a feeling of lack in the owner of *The Second Panel* if s/he does not also own Panel One, which drives the urge to further consume.

The relationship between text and cover, in this case, points to a larger ambiguity: the consumer product that rails against consumerism, the fetish item that wants to undo the fetishization of language and texts, the marginalized text that is aware of the fact that it is always already recuperated into the economy that it argues against.

It is possible to see McCaffery's text as an attack on consumer capitalism; however, it is impossible to see McCaffery's book as anything other than complicit, even enthusiastically so, with consumer capitalism. The act of publication has negated the text's intended critique. As Ron Silliman argues "The poet who writes with the idea of having her poems published, of having them collected into books and distributed through stores and direct mail purchases... has inescapably been drawn into the creation of commodities" (21). *The Second Panel* attempts to exist outside an economy that it is actually driving forward.

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January 7, 2005

The relationship between *The Second Panel* and its covers is, according to Gérard Genette, the relationship between the text and its paratext:

> A literary work consists, entirely or essentially, of a text, defined (very minimally) as a more or less long sequence of verbal statements that are more or less endowed with significance. But this text is rarely presented in an unadorned state, unreinforced and unaccompanied by a certain number of verbal or other productions, such as an author's name, a title, a preface, illustrations. And although we do not always know whether these productions are to be regarded as belonging to the text, in any case they surround it and extend it, precisely in order to *present* it, in the usual sense of this verb but also in the strongest sense: to *make present*, to ensure the text's presence in the world, its "reception" and consumption in the form (nowadays, at least) of a book. These accompanying productions, which vary in extent and appearance, constitute what I have called elsewhere the work's *paratext*.... For us, accordingly, the paratext is what enables a text to become a book and to be offered as such to its readers and, more generally, to the public. More than a boundary or a sealed border, the paratext is, rather, a threshold... that offers the world at large the possibility of either stepping inside or turning back. It is an "undefined zone" between the inside and the outside, a zone without any hard and fast boundary on either the inward side (turned toward the text) or the outward side (turned toward the world's discourse about the text), an edge, or, as Philippe Lejeune put it, "a fringe of the printed text which in reality controls one's whole reading of the text." Indeed, this fringe, always the conveyor of a commentary that is authorial or more or less legitimated by the author, constitutes a zone between text and off-text, a zone not only of transition but also of transaction: a privileged place of a pragmatics and a strategy, of an influence on the public, an influence that – whether well or poorly understood and achieved – is at the

> service of a better reception for the text and a more pertinent reading of it (more pertinent, of course, in the eyes of the author and his allies). (1-2)

The covers, the preface, and, in the case of *The Second Panel*, even the binding are all paratextual elements. The text of *The Second Panel* is both a book and a panel, a book and not a book, precisely because the paratextual elements work to keep both possibilities alive. There is no reason why, of course, any text could not be placed into panel form (all it would take are two copies—so both verso and recto could be displayed—scissors, scotch tape, and a display area large enough for the completed panel). However, as Genette argues, the paratextual elements of most books work to present the text as books. The paratextual elements surrounding *The Second Panel* are somewhat unique in that they argue simultaneously for the text as book and as panel, with the covers and binding supporting *book* and the Preface supporting *panel*. Interestingly enough, the pages themselves remain ambivalent: they are anchored in the binding (*book*) but they also each have a perforated line indicating the desire to undo that binding (*panel*). It is the paratext that holds the text in a state of limbo, as neither book nor panel but also both at the same time. It is, as Genette argues, the flexibility of the paratext, not the text itself, that allows for this ambiguity:

> Whatever aesthetic intention may come into play as well, the main issue for the paratext is not to "look nice" around the text but rather to ensure for the text a destiny consistent with the author's purpose.... Being immutable, the text in itself is incapable of adapting to changes in its public in space and over time. The paratext – more flexible, more versatile, always transitory because transitive – is, as it were, an instrument of adaptation. (407-08)

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What role does joy play in *The Second Panel*? I would argue that *Carnival*'s entire exercise is one of play, of experimenting with and presenting the sheer joy of language and of written text. McCaffery removes language and writing from the restrictions that communication normally places on them; the text no longer has to *mean* anything. Although McCaffery doesn't mention it in his introduction, the reader surely must see the connections between the poem and the more common meaning of the word *carnival*: "**1.** The season immediately preceding Lent, devoted in Italy and other Roman Catholic countries to revelry and riotous amusement, Shrove-tide; the festivity of this season. **2. a.** *fig.* Any season or course of feasting, riotous revelry, or indulgence. **b.** A fun-fair; circus. *N. Amer.*" (*Oxford English Dictionary*). The title, then, alerts the reader that, like a game of chance at a fair, the object of the poem is amusement, not success (like a game of chance, the text has been *rigged* by the operator/writer to achieve a certain outcome, but what that outcome may be is subject to chance; in this case, chance is introduced by the reader, since there is no proper path through the text for the reader to follow).

The title allows the reader to move playfully through the text, to enjoy each little area of the text as both a discrete entity and as part of the larger carnival. As if to get the reader in the proper mood, the text begins by offering itself as a gift to the reader ("i am giving you the page" [page 1]), and then tells a joke:

> or the one about the constipated
> mathematician who
> worked it out with
> a pencil (2)

I think the corny, juvenile nature of the joke works to set the reader at ease; reading this text is not all work and no play, it assures us—relax and have fun with it. There is a mingling, then, of what people often consider the separate categories of high and low art, in a way that seems to work against the idea that these categories can really exist discretely at all. For instance, this text-piece on page 2,

> brown the hand touches
> out of this created
> the central figure
> she was made of earth borne
> made move in a space
> that was not to be historical

carries with it the elements of traditional, high art Poetry (inverted diction, antiquated spelling, elevated theme of history, space, and creation); however, this brown hand is separated only by a small distance from the mathematician working out his constipation with a pencil. The brown hand of high art is suspiciously close to the scatological work of the mathematician, which taints (and I think there is a pun intended here) the notion of purity associated with high art.

I think it is also important to note that the soiled creating hand and writing (the mathematician's pencil) are linked. The act of writing is necessarily being made fun of in *Carnival* whenever possible. Truman Capote's comment on The Beat writers—"That isn't writing at all, it's typing"—is turned on its head in *Carnival*, with typing being privileged over writing. The notion that creation and mechanical processes (typing, stamping) are linked also undercuts the inherited notion of author as divinely inspired prophet; instead, McCaffery is just a man making marks on paper.

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Wednesday, November 26, 2003

McCaffery is obviously concerned with moving past the physical body, towards a pure, ideal relationship between mind and language; a quick glance at some of the phrases he uses to define the word *carnival* show this desire: *a putting away of the flesh*; *a fleshless call to language*; *a call we enter as components to become a part of that macro-syntax*; *to confront [language] as material without reference to an author or to any otherness* (*The Second Panel* Introduction). This all seems innocent enough, except for one possible exception: is McCaffery's call to throw off the body a call that presumes a white, male reader?

As Richard Dyer, in his book *White*, argues, "It has become common for those marginalised by culture to acknowledge the situation from which they speak, but those who occupy positions of cultural hegemony blithely carry on as if what they say is neutral and unsituated – human, not raced...[;] there is something especially white in this non-located and disembodied position of knowledge..." (4). I think, to some extent, Dyer's comments can be used for gender and economic blindspots as well: in these areas as well, those people in the dominant category blithely presume that they speak for all the Others, that their ideas are universal:

> For those in power in the West, as long as whiteness is felt to be the

> human condition, then it alone both defines normality and fully inhabits it.... [T]he equation of being white with being human secures a position of power. White people have power and believe that they think, feel and act like and for all people; white people, unable to see their particularity, cannot take account of other people's; white people create the dominant images of the world and don't quite see that they thus construct the world in their own image; white people set standards of humanity by which they are bound to succeed and other bound to fail. Most of this is not done maliciously...." (Dyer 9)

White, middle class males, then, seem to be in particular danger (through sheer weight of cultural capital) of assuming that they are the norm, that their ideas, beliefs, and values are all just *normal common sense*. McCaffery's call to leave the body behind, which at first glance seems like a call for everyone to engage equally, on a level playing field, with language, implies a certain amount of inability to see that he implicitly believes that he is not his body, that his body is just a shell for his pure, white, male self.

The problem then becomes one of identity politics; how does a member of a social group that does not have or want this relationship between self and body relate to a text like *Carnival*? Specifically, can a woman set aside her body (a body which has often been claimed by feminists as a site of self) and still feel that she maintains her self outside her body? The same question applies to a member of a visible minority or a person who is disabled. Many individuals in these groups see their bodies as sites of self; how, then, can one of those individuals be expected to view her or his body as though it were a meaningless container?

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Can McCaffery's assumption that the self exists outside the body offer any positive ideas to members of groups outside the hegemony? There is, I think, a belief in the universality of humanity that, while troublesome in terms of identity politics, intends to be inclusive, to pull people together, to help people move past physical differences into a realm where everyone can relate equally to language.

McCaffery, then, is not concerned with identity politics, and it may not be fair to attack him on points that he is not dealing with. It seems much more likely that McCaffery believes that it is a person's relationship to language, not a person's physical body, that shapes the person's self.

Does this excuse McCaffery's oversight? Or does it just prove how bad his oversight is?

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The page that forms the upper-right-hand corner of the panel contains a mandala that is broken open by a wedge of text. The red text states that "the bounded sound that is the word declared as a consonantal edge a discriminated entity with the poem a pattern of such demarcations," and the last of this spins into the mandala like a string spun around the spoke of a wheel.

What is the reader to make of this text? Does *discriminated* mean "differentiated," or does it mean "perceived"? Or does it mean "unfavourably distinguished," as in to be discriminated against? Is a word, then, in McCaffery's text merely a differentiated sound, a perceived sound, or is it a sound that is discriminated against? All three of these meanings are necessarily embedded in the word, so how do we decide? Does McCaffery even want us to decide, or are we to accept all these possibilities at once?

Perhaps one answer lies in the mandala itself. Formed by stamping "CHANGE OF ADDRESS" in a circular pattern, it contains a hidden pun; not just the moving of a residence, but the changing in a way of speaking, of addressing others. What we are left with is a multiplicity of possible meanings for the text and the mandala, but all these meanings circle around the notions of language and change. Like so much of *Carnival*, the only certainty is that McCaffery is trying to get the reader to re-examine her relationship with language, to change her address in regards to language.

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Friday, November 28, 2003

Life in alphabet city:

you don't know you're in it

> essentially we're all verbs
> and exist as a part of it existing as
> it is a part of us it is not entered that is to
> say you don't go there passing through just getting out
> of it but always by the same gate always in front of you
> each time shutting off a part of
> ourselves the change beyond recognition
> lost energy as a part of the alphabet city look at
> the city again i say it is your death in language fingers
> rooted to the eyes that make them guides merely guides
> through the deaf breath scattered on the page (*The Second Panel* 6)

It is sections like this in *Carnival* that lead me to believe *The Second Panel* is an early attempt by McCaffery to work out the issues that would later be fully formed in his later, more obviously Language Writing texts (*Intimate Distortions*, *The Black Debt*, *Theory of Sediment*). Those later texts do not have a specifically visual element, presumably because McCaffery comes to see it as unnecessary noise that clouds the attempt to deal directly with language as the medium that constitutes, as opposed to describes, the world. If this is the case, then text sections like the one quoted above are steps progressing away from the visual and towards the more mature concerns McCaffery will soon embark on. Marjorie Perloff certainly reads *Carnival* in this sense, as being interesting primarily in terms of what it leads to in McCaffery's later texts:

> *Carnival* represents the first stage of McCafferian language experimentation, the stage when the "the death of the referent" as well as the fabled "death of the subject" were taken to be de rigeur. As the poet's book art evolved, the drive toward nonreferentiality began to give way to the recognition that the referent never wholly "dies," even if the "trace structure" and "scriptive play" (Derrida's terms) of poetic language complicate its determination. ("Inner Tension / In Attention" 269)

Perloff goes on to read McCaffery's entire career in terms of a constant progression, with each subsequent text getting closer to an implied goal; Perloff reads McCaffery's texts in such a way that she elevates an experimentation that takes place later in his career as being a better experimentation: *Dr. Saddhu's Muffins* and *Ow's Waif* improve on *Carnival*, and these texts "look[] ahead to" *Black Debt* (273). Perloff traces McCaffery's career chronologically and linearly; for her, each subsequent text is an improvement or refinement of an earlier text. My problem with Perloff's reading is that it appears to necessarily denigrate earlier texts, as though she were following the dictum *post hoc ergo propter hoc*. In my mind, this naive reading of a writer's career would be bad enough; however, McCaffery's texts have repeatedly offered attacks against the notion of a unified subjectivity, for both reader and writer. Perloff's reading sneaks a unified writing subjectivity in the back door: Steve McCaffery, unified writing subject, has been working teleologically in a linear, logical, stable fashion, his entire career. Perloff's interpretation unwittingly undoes one of the fundamental attacks that McCaffery offers.

In this regard, it might make more sense to avoid the impulse to summarize a writer's oeuvre. Instead, by concentrating on single texts existing as self-contained entities, a critic can examine each text for the critiques, successes, and failures that it possesses in itself. Reading a text diachronically, by comparing it to earlier or later texts by the same author, creates a series of lacks in each text: each text lacks what another text offers, and so the notion of a teleology enters. This teleology must continue until the author's final book, which, only by the happenstance of appearing last, will be privileged by offering the author's grand summation.

Perloff's reading, by creating this series of lacks in the earlier texts, reaffirms a consumerist drive in the reader. Not only must the reader consume the text that comes after an earlier text, but the drive continues on into the future: the reader must also consume each text that the author will publish. This creates a desire that can never be fulfilled, as even the author's final text will only whet the reader's appetite for an imagined, ultimate text that can never, theoretically or practically, exist.

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Marjorie Perloff, in her essay "'Inner Tension / In Attention' Steve McCaffery's Book Art," states that "*Carnival* subordinated the semantic to visual effects..." (271). But does this hierarchy actually exist in the text, or is it one that Perloff imposes on the text? I would suggest that neither the semantic nor the visual elements hold sway over the other, but work in concert to deny both the absolute linearity and the absolute non-linearity of language. Instead of seeing one element as privileged over the other, I see the two co-existing in such a way that they create, at the same time, a both/and as well as a neither/nor situation. Language in *Carnival* is both fully visual and semantic at the same time that it is truly neither visual nor semantic. The combinatory nature of *Carnival* denies either element exists without the other. *Carnival* exists in a liminal state of *betweenness*, never completely comfortable as *just* one thing.

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Wednesday, December 3, 2003

In Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque, the feast holds an important place; the ingestion of food holds particular importance in terms of the individual's relationship with the world:

> In the oldest system of images food was related to work. It concluded work and struggle and was their crown of glory. Work triumphed in food. Human labor's encounter with the world and the struggle against it ended in food, in the swallowing of that which had been wrested from the world. As the last victorious stage of work, the image of food often symbolized the entire labor process. There were no sharp dividing lines; labor and food represented the two sides of a unique phenomenon, the struggle of man against the world, ending in his victory. It must be stressed that both labor and food were collective; the whole of society took part in them. Collective food as the conclusion of labor's collective process was not a biological, animal act but a social event. If food is separated from work and conceived as part of a private way of life, then nothing remains of the old images: man's encounter with the world and tasting the world, the open mouth, the relation of food and speech, the gay truth. (Bakhtin 281-82)

Eating takes on a triumphant role, where the person consuming claims a position of power in his/her relationship with the world, through the ingestion of the world, by making the world a part of the devouring person's personal body. Moreover, the individual is also connected with the rest of the community; eating, then, ties the individual both to the physical world and to the human community.

In McCaffery's *The Second Panel*, there are no major instances of eating in the text; however, I would suggest that McCaffery continues the relationship between his carnival and Bakhtin's through the use of breath in *The Second Panel*. There are several instances of breathing in *The Second Panel*: "that same inhalation of / the pure space that lay between his fingers" (2); "she had paused the deep / sound of her breath was written upon the temple..." (2); "being brought / up upon the fact / that breath is / the purest sound" (5); "the message being that we are all poets one and all as long as we have lungs..." (6); "a thawed mandalic form that burns the breath" (11). Furthermore, there are the numerous instances where the sound of breath is written into/onto the panel: for instance, the "h" and "a" sections of the first page alone can be read as the inhalation/exhalation of breath. I would argue that in McCaffery's text, it is through the ingestion of breath/air, not the ingestion of food/matter, that the individual conducts her/his relationship with the world. In breathing, the individual ingests the world and survives by making the air his/her own, by converting air to what the body needs for respiration. It is breathing, not eating, that is the sign of victory for McCaffery, and this is so not just because of the renewal of the body's life through respiration, but also because breath is what allows speech: the sharing of words and the ideas that the words hold. In *The Second Panel*, it is the ability to produce speech that is the sign of victory over the world, as language will shape, contain, and make "real" for us the physical world.

Breath, speech, language are also *The Second Panel*'s triumvirate that allow for community. Allowing the individual to enter into a relationship with the world partially removes the boundaries of the individual as discrete entity. Bakhtin's formulations of the carnival feast explains what I mean by this:

> No meal can be sad. Sadness and food are incompatible (while death and food are perfectly compatible). The banquet always celebrates a victory

> and this is part of its very nature. Further, the triumphal banquet is always universal. It is the triumph of life over death. In this respect it is equivalent to conception and birth. The victorious body receives the defeated world and is renewed. (283)

If, as I have just argued above, breath is the continuation of carnival feasting in *The Second Panel*, then it is breath that allows the individual a sense of the collective. We all take in oxygen through our lungs; it's what allows us to exist, to share the planet. Speech, in this sense, as a by-product of breath, might be more inclusive than exclusive in *The Second Panel*; this would necessarily require a rereading of the Babel myth, where the creation of different languages divides communities (McCaffery seems to subscribe to this belief in Panel One). Perhaps this is just an attempt to claim a middle ground: language barriers may divide communities, but it is language that drives the formation of communities in the first place.

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Is there another sense in which feasting is relevant to *Carnival*? Is it reasonable to suggest that the reader ingests the texts as s/he reads it, and therefore claims it as her/his own, just as Bakhtin argues happens during feasting? Given that McCaffery states that readers must find their own way through the text, must "move freely, as the language itself moves, along one and more of the countless reading paths available," (Introduction), I think this idea is reasonable.

This notion of the reader ingesting the text brings with it a different author/reader relationship. As with other writerly texts, *The Second Panel* maintains the carnivalesque drive to invert power relationships. Bakhtin describes the difference between the official and the carnival feasts in this way:

> the official feast asserted all that was stable, unchanging, perennial: the existing hierarchy, the existing religions, political, and moral values, norms and prohibitions. It was the triumph of a truth already established, the predominant truth that was put forward as eternal and indisputable. This is why the tone of the official feast was monolithically serious and why the element of laughter was alien to it.... As opposed to the official feast, one might say that carnival celebrated temporary liberation from

> the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions. Carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change, and renewal. It was hostile to all that was immortalized and completed. (9-10)

To metaphorically link feasting with reading, conventional texts work in much the same fashion as official feasts; the form helps to reaffirm the dominance of standard communicative practices. Formally experimental texts, however, work to undercut these practices by offering new ways of ingesting the text. The drive to make the reader a creative force within the text carries on the carnival tradition of inclusiveness. In *The Second Panel*, the reader authors the text as much as McCaffery, which creates an equality between the positions of author and reader. My linking of feasting and reading might at first seem stretched, to say the least; however, Bakhtin himself links carnival feasting with egalitarian communication:

> Rank was especially evident during official feasts; everyone was expected to appear in the full regalia of his calling, rank, and merits and to take the place corresponding to his position. It was a consecration of inequality. On the contrary, all were considered equal during carnival. Here, in the town square, a special form of free and familiar contact reigned among people who were usually divided by the barriers of caste, property, profession, and age.... This temporary suspension, both ideal and real, of hierarchical rank created during carnival time a special type of communication impossible in everyday life. This led to the creation of special forms of marketplace speech and gesture, frank and free, permitting no distance between those who came in contact with each other and liberating from norms of etiquette and decency impossible at other times. (10)

What might seem, then, to be a radically new way of envisioning the reader/author relationship could be seen as nothing more than an attempt to bring the carnivalesque into an area of social exchange that managed to fend off the earlier instances of carnival.

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"Festive eating is always ambivalent, involving death, the devouring of the world through the mouth, and new life, regeneration. That ambivalence, of carnival as both destructive and creative, death and new life, Bakhtin will continually insist on. It is like 'time' itself, which kills and gives birth in a single act" (Docker 177).

Docker's comment suggests that the carnivalesque ingestion of breath/speech/language might not be the completely positive notion I suggested earlier. If, for example, breath/speech/language do form a triumvirate that allows the individual to move into the community, then it must also be recognized that this triumvirate creates a two-way street; the community can use speech to bombard the individual, disallowing any notion of discrete individuality. If language creates community, it also destroys the belief in the uniqueness of the person. Our thoughts are shaped by language, as are our perceptions of the world itself. Much like the overly discursive pages of *The Second Panel*, it becomes impossible to separate our own thoughts from those of the community's. I am left with a very disturbing question: does the community follow the will of its individuals, or are the individuals merely slaves to an amorphous, unlocalized mass known as *community*? I believe *The Second Panel* implicitly raises this question, but either will not or cannot answer it for the reader.

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Thursday, December 4, 2003

McCaffery's attempt to undo the usual author/reader hierarchy carries on a tradition dating back centuries. The desire to attack the positions of power and bring about a more equal relationship, a feature of Language Writing that critics often consider one of its most innovative aspects, in fact merely re-introduces the carnivalesque into literature. As John Docker explains in his discussion of carnival,

> Festive speech is free and jocular, including the right to be frank, a frankness that dooms and destroys the authority of all exalted and official genres, with their sanctimonious seriousness, their mysticism and 'abstract-idealistic sublimation', their fear and piousness. Speech, the word, is liberated into free play, especially free play with the sacred, nearly always including elements of parody and travesty of the Last

> Supper. (177)

The overtly religious attacks are missing in *The Second Panel* (though religious themes are common in Panel One), but I think this shows a changing attitude towards religion over the years. Religious hierarchies were perhaps the most dominant social hierarchies at the time of the original carnival; however, in much of 1970s Anglophone Canada, religious hierarchies are not extremely pertinent. What is pertinent, for McCaffery (and for other early Language writers in the US), is the nearly sacred position granted to the author, the Romantic notion of author as prophet, and the subsequent homage the reader-parishioner pays to the author-god. In a genre like experimental poetry, the author's control over the material is often especially omnipotent; the author often seeks to recreate language in his or her desired image, sometimes leaving the reader awestruck and passive in the light of the author's creativity. With the notion of play, of carnival, entwined in McCaffery's text, I believe the desire is to dislodge the author from this authoritarian position; consequently, there is the inclusion of texts obviously not authored by McCaffery (such as the newspaper article on the crash of a small plane), the overlapping and overstriking of text, the use of impersonal objects such as stamps. The idea is that the text denies the centrality of its own author as well as the high art position of experimental text. The use of these lower art forms of texts is an attempt to liberate speech into free play.

There is a definite attack on the sacred in *The Second Panel*; there is, however, no attack on religion. *The Second Panel* does not seem interested in the relationship between the sacred and the religious, choosing instead to focus on the relationship between the sacred and the author(iz)ed. The attack is on the notion, which society often passively accepts, that the author, through some mystical command of language, gains an insight into society and the individual. The circular stamps, where language spins in solipsistically on itself, along with the long chains of nonsense letters throughout *The Second Panel* mock the author's authority in a way similar to the original carnival's self-mocking:

> [Comic laughter] is not an individual reaction to some isolated "comic" event. Carnival laughter is the laughter of all the people. Second, it is

> universal in scope; it is directed at all and everyone, including the carnival's participants. The entire world is seen in its droll aspect, in its gay relativity. Third, this laughter is ambivalent: it is gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding….
>
> Let us enlarge upon the second important trait of the people's festive laughter: that it is also directed at those who laugh. The people do not exclude themselves from the wholeness of the world. They, too, are incomplete, they also die and are revived and renewed. This is one of the essential differences of the people's festive laughter from the pure satire of modern times. The satirist whose laughter is negative places himself above the object of his mockery, he is opposed to it. The wholeness of the world's comic aspect is destroyed, and that which appears comic becames [sic] a private reaction. The people's ambivalent laughter, on the other hand, expresses the point of view of the whole world; he who is laughing also belongs to it. (Bakhtin 11-12)

The Second Panel is an example of McCaffery mocking himself as well as those writers who refuse to experiment with the inherited codes of language and text; by implying that language and written texts are nothing more than the author's attempt to reify language, to make language behave properly, McCaffery acknowledges his own text as merely a different example of that attempt. In *The Second Panel*, then, the author mocks his authorness, the authority that s/he derives by doing nothing more than authoring.

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Can an author truly mock his own authority? *The Second Panel* is still McCaffery's text. His choices have determined everything in/on the page. Yes, he has chosen tools such as stamps, which can be looked at as mechanical hints that the author has no special creative genius. Similar to Duchamp's readymades, such techniques point out the artificiality of authority. However, as has been noted by many scholars, Duchamp's readymades have been re-inscribed within the notion of genius: instead of calling into question Duchamp as artist, they conversely prove that the great artist can make anything art. It is also possible to see McCaffery's use of stamps and uncited borrowings from newspapers as proving that he is a greater author than other authors, since he is able to transform supposedly unpoetic elements into poetry.

Does the result necessarily undo the intent, then? Because Duchamp's urinal is now considered a piece of art, does that make his original statement on the art world invalid? Is there a middle ground, where we can acknowledge a (perhaps naive) desire to attack artistic conventions even though those attacks eventually became the new conventions? Or does this just place us where we started, with the prophet-artist leading the masses forward?

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McCaffery's decision to include texts of which he is not the author, such as the newspaper article, as well as the use of so many different, discrete text bits throughout, help to place the reader "within the center of his language" (Introduction). One of the less obvious aspects of this fractured text technique is the similarity it holds to the use of masks in carnival:

> The mask is connected with the joy of change and reincarnation, with gay relativity and with the merry negation of uniformity and similarity; it rejects conformity to oneself. The mask is related to transition, metamorphoses, the violation of natural boundaries, to mockery and familiar nicknames. It contains the playful element of life; it is based on a peculiar interrelation of reality and image, characteristics of the most ancient rituals and spectacles. (Bakhtin 39-40)

The use of the different text-bits, each with a different speaking voice, allows McCaffery to wear masks throughout *The Second Panel*. The reader is unable to tell which text is written by the *real* Steve McCaffery and which bits are written by either a *false* McCaffery or by someone else (in fact, the reader is unable to distinguish between the latter two writing positions). All this makes the notion of any "real" author rather absurd. Moreover, I think it also allows the reader to play the role of author; not only does the reader choose his/her way through the non-linear text, but the frequent changes in speaker in the text allows the reader to imaginatively create the speaking subjects behind each text bit; since we cannot achieve any proveably correct insights into the author, we are free to create our own speaking subjects throughout.

The result is that the reader also wears masks, constantly forced to change speaking positions, and, because of this, *The Second Panel* allows for the freedom from oneself to which Bakhtin refers. The reader encounters only language, nothing else, when immersed in *The Second Panel*. As McCaffery desires, the reader leaves behind his/her individuality and enters into language as a constitutive force, language both as a mask that allows the individual to leave behind her/his individuality as well as a mask that covers the supposedly *real* world from view. Language becomes the ultimate trickster in *Carnival*.

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Friday, December 5, 2003

The Second Panel is overtly concerned with moving people away from individuality and towards a relationship with language, with "put[ting] the reader... within the center of his language" (Introduction). The use of masking, which *The Second Panel* accomplishes through palimpsest and unrelated, fractured text-bits, does more than move the individual towards this relationship with language; it also moves the reader from an individual to a communal sense of self. The reader, through the masks, abandons a sense of self, of individuality, and adopts a sense of commonality with all other readers (readers that are real, possible, or imaginable). McCaffery's text prods its readers to go through this abandoning of self; although readers can ignore this prod, many will likely heed it. The result of this abandoning is the formation of a community of readers who have no secure sense of self (at least during the reading of the text). Docker succinctly explains the communal nature of the carnival:

> masking also enables collective and historic meanings.... The carnival crowd in the marketplace or streets… is not merely a crowd. It is the people as a whole, organised in their own way, outside of and contrary to the usual forms of 'coercive socioeconomic and political organisation', suspended for the time of the festivity. Through costume and mask people can cease to be themselves, they can 'exchange bodies', and so

> become an indissoluble part of the collectivity and community. (180)

According to Docker, the dissolution of the sense of a discrete self brings with it a feeling of community; there is a feeling of interpenetration with other people experiencing carnival/*Carnival*. The readers leaves behind the elements that normally work against commonality (socioeconomic and political affiliations). In McCaffery's text, the reader leaves behind these affiliations are abandoned because s/he enters into an overwhelming relationship with language. This relationship with language forges both synchronic and diachronic relationships with other fellow travellers within language. Consequently, there is a mental/emotional connection between readers of *The Second Panel*, one that overcomes the physical distance between them (after all, few readers will encounter *The Second Panel* together, as people experienced carnivals in the past).

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The abandoning of individuality within *Carnival*, however, is not necessarily a positive thing. Unlike the true carnival, *The Second Panel* asks us to leave our physical bodies behind, to become a mind within language. The sensual nature of carnival, the sense of a physical continuity, is therefore abandoned. In the real carnival,

> The carnivalesque crowd in the marketplace or in the streets is not merely a crowd. It is the people as a whole, but organized in their own way, the way of the people. It is outside of and contrary to all existing forms of the coercive socio-economic and political organization, which is suspended for the time of the festivity
>
> This festive organization of the crowd must be first of all concrete and sensual. Even the pressing throng, the physical contact of bodies, acquires a certain meaning. The individual feels that he is an indissoluble part of the collectivity, a member of the people's mass body. In this whole the individual body ceases to a certain extent to be itself; it is possible, so to say, to exchange bodies, to be renewed (through change of costume and mask). At the same time the people become aware of their sensual, material bodily unity and community. (Bakhtin 255)

The participants in *Carnival* do not feel this physical relationship with the natural world; instead, everything in the physical world becomes a creation of language. By making the reader abandon the physical world, *The Second Panel* creates the false notion that all people are the same (not *equal*, but the same). Consequently, the text disregards any physical difference—gender, race, physical differences—as well as economic disparities and sexual orientations as unimportant. The relationship with language that *The Second Panel* creates comes with a price; people become one big mass of uniformity.

As a result, *The Second Panel* ignores the socio-political and economic differences that cause real strife in the world, which leaves the text dealing with ethereal problems at the expense of offering any thoughts on practical matters. Yes, the way language shapes our minds is an important matter, but it is hard to deal with these matters if you are starving, oppressed, or exploited. The reading audience for *The Second Panel*, then, is a narrow one; what at first seems like an attempt to forge a commonality between all people is revealed to be an attempt to link together all upper-middle class intellectuals, the people who have the comfort and ability to engage with the questions and issues *Carnival* raises. In this sense, *The Second Panel* is liberalism at its most exclusive.

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Is there an underlying consumerism in *The Second Panel*? In spite of McCaffery's Marxist stance, is there something in *The Second Panel* that kindles in the reader a desire to consume? On a basic level, the systems of consumer capitalism work to persuade people to purchase the text and other texts by McCaffery, and so the text itself is part of the capitalist cycle. However, is there something more fundamental tying this text to consumerism?

There is a distinct link between the traditional carnival and capitalism. The carnivalesque was a moment of unbridled desire for consumption, to the point where it is part of early advertising culture:

> Bakhtin enthuses over early forms of advertising, especially the famous *cris* of Paris, loud advertisments [sic] for merchandise called out by the

> Paris street vendors, composed to a certain versified form, and popular for centuries. At fairs in early modern Europe such cries had to compete with the announcements of the barker, apothecary, actor, quack, and astrologer. We must remember, Bakhtin says, that sound then played a prominent role in everyday life and culture.... Not only was advertising oral and loud, but all announcements, orders, and laws were made in such form. The *cris de Paris* would praise food and wines offered for sale, with every food and dish having its own rhyme and melody. The cries represented in themselves a noisy kitchen and a loud, abundantly served banquet, a symphony of feasting. (Docker 178)

This link between carnival and advertising is based on desire and lack, as in most, if not all advertising. In *The Second Panel*, while there are no specific moments of advertising, I believe there are several lacks created, which consequently create a desire in the reader for further consumption. Through its constant bombardment of different styles of language, high and low, poetic and prosaic, fiction and reportage, the text pulls the reader into an erotic relationship with each. Since there are only small samples from each style, no aspect of language fully satisfies the reader; instead, they create a desire to encounter more from each style of language. The reader desires to know more about the shooting of the overtly erotic woman on page 9, with the constant references to her breasts, the dripping barrel, the bloody carpet; there is a similar desire in regards to the tantalising text bit from the newspaper on the small plane crash near Yellowknife, from which "there were no survivors" (14). Furthermore, the text explicitly directs the reader towards other texts to consume: Pope's *Dunciad*, *The Rape of the Lock*, and his translation of *The Iliad*, Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* (all mentioned in the Introduction), and Charpentier (4); *The Second Panel* points towards all of these writers as figures of authority who prop up McCaffery's text, which in turn means that the reader should seek out these texts if s/he does not know them.

All these moments of textual desire drive the reader's erotic desire to consume. As Docker argues in regards to Bakhtin's limited view of the carnivalesque, "he [Bakhtin] also ignored the way fairs could disrupt local and provincial habits and traditions by introducing a certain cosmopolitanism into Renaissance life, arousing desires in ordinary people of the time for exciting, exotic and strange commodities" (187). Along these lines, McCaffery's introduction of elements from other texts awakens in the reader a desire for the other texts; *Carnival* is not completely satisfying in itself, because it prods the readers to consume outside its textual borders.

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Wednesday, December 10, 2003

Can any text be complete, in and of itself? Turning to Bakhtin again, I use his notion of the dialogic imagination, where every text anticipates a textual response. Looked at diachronically, every text creates a desire in the reader for a response (most texts, however, do not necessarily receive these responses, and so they drop out of the popular imagination).

But what about synchronically? Can any text avoid creating a desire for further consumption in the reader? This notion seems rather naive, and based in a notion of textual purity. According to the earlier entry, *Carnival* could avoid creating a consumptive desire if only it did not bring in textual entries from other sources. If these entries were not present, then presumably this would cause the reader to only want to reread *Carnival* until boredom set in and it was set aside (this boredom, could, of course, set in after only one reading).

This idea seems logical, if somewhat limited, but what it calls for is a rigid sense of generic boundaries. Experimental poetry could avoid this consumptive desire only if it completely ignored any reference to other texts; it would have to shut itself off from the world and create its own universe. Even if that were possible, wouldn't this drive experimental poetry to further realms of obscurity? Taken to the extreme, only the unattainable text could defeat the reader's desire to consume (and Michael O'Driscoll has suggested to me that it would not be possible even then, since lack produces desire).

It might be the case, then, that experimental poetry, and every other text, cannot expect or be expected to defeat the desire to consume. Such textual hermeticism is not possible.

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Thursday, December 11, 2003

The criticisms that *The Second Panel* offers—of the limited nature of linear language use, of the limited world conceptions and perceptions that linear language brings with it, of the capitalist nature of grammar and signification—carry with them a disturbing undercurrent of a possible reaffirmation of what the text challenges.

Take, for example, the criticism of high culture that *The Second Panel* offers. The inclusion of pop culture texts, such as newspaper articles, pulp fiction, and, perhaps most important, doodling, can certainly be read as an attack on the Modernist division of art into categories such as *high* and *low*; the inclusion of these elements in an experimental poem, with all the cultural capital that this *high* art form has, works towards defeating these definitions through a conflating them.

However, *The Second Panel* does not necessarily work in this fashion. As with so much of the carnivalesque, there is the possibility that the text reaffirms what it is supposedly criticizing. A possible alternative reading is always possible:

> Michael D. Bristol has drawn attention to the possible sinister side of plebeian culture in general, where feelings of resentment and grievance against the ruling elite could be, in a process of displaced abjection, deflected into hostility towards Jews, foreigners, prostitutes, actors. Stallybrass and White also argue that carnival could involve displaced abjection, where low social groups might demonise not those in authority, but those even lower, women, Jews, and animals like cats and pigs, such ritual of violence reaffirming rather than challenging traditional Christian perceptions. (Docker 192)

The possibility exists, then, that the elements of pop culture *The Second Panel* includes are included in order to have the reader mock them; such obviously artless pieces obviously don't belong in poetry, and so the reader laughs at them, not with them. The outcome depends on the reader; it is just as reasonable to see the pop elements as being mocked in *The Second Panel* as it is to see them as mocking the division between high and low art. McCaffery has turned the text over to the reader so that she can find her own path; the result is that there is no possibility for pure critique in the text, since the reader must decide for herself what the "proper" message is. As Docker suggests, the reader is just as likely to attack the elements in society that do not have power (in this case, power would be derived from cultural capital) as they are those elements with power. The result is that the text does not place the status quo in serious jeopardy.

This point calls into question all the other criticisms which at first might seem obvious. Does *The Second Panel* mock the linearity of language, or does it actually parody the non-linear nonsense put forth in experimental poetry? Is the criticism against grammar and signification, or is it against those who try to deconstruct them? Does *The Second Panel* critique the constitutive nature of language, or does it critique those who offer this critique? The problem lies not only in the ambivalence of the text, but in the reaction of the reader. It is possible that the reader will see the text as offering all the critiques I initially suggested; however, as with the carnival goers of the past, there is the possibility for "displaced abjection." The reader could choose to support the status quo by dismissing out of hand the critiques offered by *The Second Panel* for no other reason than that the critiques are against the status quo; in other words, the reader can gain a measure of acceptance by the powerful members of the status quo by refuting charges against the status quo, even though those criticisms work to benefit the reader at the expense of those in power.

On the other hand, in keeping with the ambivalent nature of the carnivalesque, the reader might choose to align him/herself with the pop culture elements *because* s/he perceives the text to be mocking them; there is the possibility that the reader could choose to go against what she/he perceives to be the conservative message of *The Second Panel*. There is no guarantee with whom the reader will choose to align, as Docker admits:

> I agree with Stallybrass and White that Bakhtin did not see that the fair could be a crucial point of intersection between the European citizen and the 'imperialist' spoils of the nation-state, where shows would increasingly include exhibition of exotic colonised peoples, from the West Indies to the south Pacific to Africa, as freaks and monsters.

> Stallybrass and White admit, however, even here, that the subordinate could feel an alliance with the exotic peoples on display, as common objects of the contemptuous, censuring gaze of the respectable strolling the fairs and shows. Amidst the grotesquerie, carnivalesque continued to destabilize any settled divisions of the world. (192)

These alliances are common outside the oppressed, as well. The criticisms carnival offers depend a great deal on the social communities of every reader; indeed, the interpretations that the reader offers can shed a great deal of light on his/her social, religious, economic, and political beliefs and assumptions:

> In the comedy of World Upside Down prints, [David] Kunzle says, we see the general cosmic reversal of earth and city above, sky and stars below.... There are ironic reversals of rich and poor, with prints showing a beggar giving money to a rich man, or a rich man giving a lift on his back to the poor man....
>
> Like Davis, Kunzle argues for the 'essential ambivalence' of World Upside Down. The WUD prints, he says, don't in themselves ensure a set ideological meaning. Groups in society who are satisfied with the existing social order might take pleasure in the motif as mocking the efforts of those who wish to overturn that order. Discontented groups, however, might see WUD as a promise of revenge and a vindication of just desires. The World Upside Down broadsheet could be made to appeal to the political conservative, the dissident, and the lover of fantasy and nonsense. The same or similar aesthetic conventions could be used, deployed, developed, played with, in diverse, surprising and unpredictable ideological ways. (Docker 196)

This essential ambivalence of interpretation means that there is always the possibility that the reader will derive a radical criticism out of an open text like *The Second Panel*, even if the text does not intend that criticism. There can be no truly correct interpretation of a carnivalesque text, since each reader's belief systems receive roughly the same amount of credence from the text, which means that critics should judge each reader's interpretations to be reasonable. Each criticism that *The Second Panel* offers, then, carries with it the trace of its own counter-criticism.

January 12, 2005

In terms of my idea that the carnivalesque text rules out the notion of a truly correct interpretation, Michael O'Driscoll cautions me to be careful; he rightly suggests that I should offer *The Second Panel* "as a kind of limit case that points out more general qualities of the textual" (September). As I should have commented above, it is not only the carnivalesque text that escapes the notion of *the* correct interpretation: to greater or lesser degrees, all texts argue against this reification. However, I would argue that the carnivalesque text actively requests that the reader forego the drive for correctness, whereas many other texts benefit from readers who carry that drive within themselves. The amount of initiative that the reader must show in order to argue against the notion of *the* correct interpretation is usually much greater in texts that are not carnivalesque than in texts that are.

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Every critique holds the dangerous possibility of re-inscribing what it challenges. Within the concept of the carnivalesque, there is the theory of the "safety-valve," where the controlled revelries give vent to people's frustration with the status quo, not to bring change, but to allow the people to re-inscribe themselves within the dominant order. As Docker explains, "[Max] Gluckman observed certain times and spaces in traditional African societies where there would be licensed rituals of reversal, women abusing men, or abuse of the king by his subjects. Gluckman concedes that such rites permit protest, yets [sic] feels they are 'intended' to preserve and even strengthen the established social order" (193). Having released their frustrations within an artificially created environment, the people are then more willing to go back to their problems.

In this sense, texts such as *The Second Panel* preserve, rather than change, the status quo. Any critique offered to the reader will allow the reader to connect with that critique, and, after a moment of satisfaction, be able to rejoin the status quo, often meekly submitting to the critiqued aspect. All the text's challenges to language, logic, linearity, etc., actually make it easier for the reader to submit to those dominant frames. The text's critiques do not survive outside the moment of reading the text.

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The view of the carnivalesque as a safety-valve, as an unwitting tool for conservatism, has some inherent problems. Just as there is the danger of every critique reaffirming what has been critiqued, there is also the possibility that what has been reaffirmed carries with it the trace of its own critique. For example, there is the carnival inversion of woman on top, where images abound of unruly women who invert the patriarchal hierarchy, claiming for women the position of power that was assumed to be men's right:

> In 'Women on Top' Natalie Davis directly challenges [the] view that cultural inversions have a single unidirectional meaning, to strengthen and support the given social order.... Davis argues that the cultural play with the topos of the woman on top was 'mulivalent'. Images of the unruly or disorderly woman could indeed function to keep women in their place (she might do what the men *should* do). But such images could also prompt new ways of thinking and acting. They could widen behavioural options for women within and even outside marriage beyond the privileged time of stage-play and festive occasion. They kept alive alternative conceptions of family life and women's lives....
>
> The holiday rule of woman-on-top, Davis tentatively concludes, confirmed subjection throughout society, but it also promoted resistance to it. The woman-on-top renewed old systems, but also helped change them into something new. (Docker 194-5)

As opposed to an oppositional, *either/or* binary, Docker's summary of Davis's points suggests that the carnivalesque creates an ambivalent *both/and* dynamic. This formulation undoes the "always-already recuperated" argument (an argument that leaves society's discontents with absolutely no viable means of critique) that critics often put on carnivalesque moments of rupture.

The Second Panel, then, works towards a gradual change, an evolution in ideas, as opposed to a radical revolution. By displaying a non-linear, non-logical, non-grammatical, and at times non-signifying text, McCaffery does not undo the discourses that he challenges so much as he embeds a notion of criticism, of uncertainty, within those discourses. Linear language still dominates, but, for people who have read *The Second Panel*, there is an understanding that linear language is not the only game in town; hidden within every conservative language formulation lurks the carnivalesque moment of rupture.

December 15, 2004

Looking back on the above passage, it seems relevant to bring in Linda Hutcheon's work on the complicitous critique of postmodern texts. Her work offers a valuable theorization of the notion of an embedded criticism I was working towards. In *The Politics of Postmodernism*, Hutcheon argues that all postmodern texts contain, at heart, a paradox:

> postmodern art … is art that is fundamentally paradoxical in its relation to history: it is both critical of and complicitous with that which precedes it. Its relationship with the aesthetic and social past out of which it openly acknowledges it has come is one characterized by irony, though not necessarily disrespect. Basic contradictions mark its contact with artistic conventions of both production and reception: it seeks accessibility, without surrendering its right to criticize the consequences of that access. Postmodernism's relation to late capitalism, patriarchy, and the other forms of those (now suspect) master narratives is paradoxical: the postmodern does not deny its inevitable implication in them, but it also wants to use that 'insider' position to 'de-doxify' the 'givens' that 'go without saying' in those grand systems. Thus, it is neither neoconservatively nostalgic nor radically revolutionary; it is unavoidably compromised – and it knows it. (119)

Quite simply, the problem is that postmodern texts offer a "deconstructive critique" of history, representation, subjectivity, etc.—the master narratives it no longer trusts—but, in order to offer such a critique "you have to signal – and thereby install – that which you want to subvert" (152). In order to point out the faults it wants to argue against, a postmodern text must first re-stage those faults for the reader, which inevitably brings a re-inscription of those faults. However, as I argued in the above entry, the criticism, although embedded (or complicitous, to use Hutcheon's term), is still offered: "This is the art of complicity as well as critique, even in its most radically polemical political forms. This does not invalidate its critique; rather, it can be seen as both an important means of access and an avoidance of the kind of bad faith that believes art (or criticism) can ever be outside ideology" (140). By refusing to offer any firm solutions, then, *The Second Panel* also refuses to set itself outside the traditions it criticizes; the ambivalence at the heart of McCaffery's text is in tune both with the carnival of the Middle Ages and with the postmodernism of its day.

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Friday, December 12, 2003

There is an important distinction to make between the medieval and Renaissance carnivals and the text of *Carnival: The Second Panel*. Although it might seem obvious, I should point out that the carnivals of the past were cultural events, participated in by many, if not most, members of the society; it was a time where the cultural ideology shifted from serious work to serious play, from morality to immorality, from respect to satire. McCaffery's text cannot claim to hold the same importance in its postmodern society; it is, after all, just one text among millions of others, and a rather obscure one at that. So it would be silly to claim that carnival and *Carnival* have the same societal impact.

However, the spirit remains the same in both carnival and *Carnival*. Specifically, *The Second Panel* carries on the tradition of the carnivalesque that takes place outside the time of carnival. *The Second Panel* plays the same role today as did the fool figure in medieval and Renaissance society, which is to provide moments of carnivalesque rupture during the time of seriousness:

> Clowns and fools, which often figure in Rabelais' novel, are characteristic of the medieval culture of humor. They were the constant, accredited representatives of the carnival spirit in everyday life out of carnival season.... [T]hey were not actors playing their parts on a stage, as did the comic actors of a later period,... but remained fools and clowns always and wherever they made their appearance. (Bakhtin 8)

These moments of rupture, of satiric and mocking laughter, of nonsense, of masking, are all carried through *The Second Panel* into the serious, non-carnival world. *The*

Second Panel is a modern day textual version of the carnivalesque clown, right down to the clown's desire to interrupt the seriousness of life by direct challenges to the viewer/reader: "The clowns might wish to establish their independent presence by disrupting the flow and speed of narrative with spectacle and display, and by direct address to and confrontations with the audience" (Docker 202). McCaffery's attempt to locate the reader as a co-participant in the creation of textual meaning, his gift of the page to the reader (1), his use of textual fragments, of nonsense and non-linear text, all these elements work to place *Carnival* in the role of the clown, or, as the figure was also known, the wise fool. Independent, sporting their own brand of illogic, the clowns/fools work to point out the absurdity of the seriousness of life. They are revolutionary figures, offering prophetic warnings that often go unheard until too late. In this sense, *The Second Panel* plays the role of cultural prophet, cultural fool, and cultural revolutionary, all at the same time. Moreover, through the direct address to the reader, and by drawing the reader in as co-producer, *The Second Panel* desires to locate the reader within this triad as well; for, as Bakhtin notes, there are no bystanders in times of carnival:

> carnival does not know footlights, in the sense that it does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators. Footlights would destroy a carnival, as the absence of footlights would destroy a theatrical performance. Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people. While carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it. During carnival time life is subject only to its laws, that is, the law of its own freedom. It has a universal spirit; it is a special condition of the entire world, of the world's revival and renewal, in which all take part. (7)

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Traditionally, the grotesque body, the body open to the world through the act of consumption, mediated the relationship between the carnivalesque and the world. As makes sense for a bodily-based celebration, the individual connected to the carnivalesque world through his digestive orifices, the mouth and the anus, as well as his procreative organs, especially the phallus:

> The grotesque body, as we have often stressed, is a body in the act of becoming. It is never finished, never completed; it is continually built, created, and builds and creates another body. Moreover, the body swallows the world and is itself swallowed by the world.... This is why the essential role belongs to those parts of the grotesque body in which nature outgrows its own self, transgressing its own body, in which it conceives a new, second body: the bowels and the phallus. These two areas play the leading role in the grotesque image, and it is precisely for this reason that they are predominantly subject to positive exaggeration, to hyperbolization; they can even detach themselves from the body and lead an independent life, for they hide the rest of the body, as something secondary.... All these convexities and orifices have a common characteristic; it is within them that the confines between bodies and between the body and the world are overcome; there is an interchange and an interorientation. (Bakhtin 317)

In many ways, then, the physical, sensing body was the true setting for the carnivalesque. But McCaffery's text negates the physical body. In fact, McCaffery quotes a medieval definition of carnival which highlights the absence of the physical: "**CARNIVAL** from Med. L. **carnelevale**, a putting away of the flesh and hence a prelental language game..." (Introduction). How can there be a non-corporeal carnival?

I think the answer to this questions lies in the way McCaffery has shifted the carnivalesque away from the physical world, away from a person sensing her natural surroundings, and towards the textual world, towards a person sensing that he is "within the center of his language" (Introduction). For McCaffery, with his concentration on language as a constitutive force that creates the perception of the physical world, there is no *natural* world for the individual to relate to; there is only the world of language codes, the world of letters, text, and images. Consequently, for McCaffery the grotesque body of the carnivalesque is no longer a physical body (or a symbolic representation of the physical body, as was often the case), but the body of language. In one literal sense, the assembled *The Second Panel* is a picture of the grotesque body of language, amorphous, misshapen, devouring, out of control, limitless, and centre-less. It is an anarchic body, one that exists without a single brain, because every particle, or *cell*, of language is both complete in itself and also part of a larger whole. It is, at one and the same time, powerless, since it is noncorporeal and can take no action on its own, and omnipotent, since it exists everywhere in the universal human mind, shaping and controlling our relationships with the corporeal world.

Carnival The Second Panel is a representation of a postmodern Gargantua, a grotesque body that reflects not the individual's physical nature, but the individual's mental, linguistic nature. As a postmodern text, *The Second Panel* offers an implicit argument in favour of realizing that our most important relationship to the world is no longer through the corporeal body (as Bakhtin argues), but through language, a noncorporeal body that exists within and without every human mind. It argues that language is now how we relate to and merge with the world: not through our hands, our eyes, or even our mouths, but through our ideological mental constructions, which are language based. Language, not food (or even, apparently, sexual intercourse), is the sustenance that the modern individual lives by.

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December 2, 2004

Coming back to this material, another possible reading of McCaffery's text presents itself: there is really no need to refer to the swirling patterns of stamped print as mandalas—or at least not only as mandalas. It is equally possible to view these swirls as much more traditional carnival images: mouths/anuses/vaginas. As such, the swirls represent both the universe (mandala) and the material body (notably, the lower bodily strata) in one image. They can be viewed as a place of intersection for and equalization of the high and the low, the place where the cosmic body and the material body meet. As such, the text becomes a site where the reader confronts and reconciles with what Bakhtin refers to as Cosmic terror:

> We must take into consideration the importance of cosmic terror, the fear of the immeasurable, the infinitely powerful. The starry sky, the gigantic material masses of the mountains, the sea, the cosmic

> upheavals, elemental catastrophies—these constitute the terror that pervades ancient mythologies, philosophies, the systems of images, and language itself with its semantics.... This cosmic terror is not mystic in the strict sense of the word; rather it is the rear of that which is materially huge and cannot be overcome by force.... The struggle against cosmic terror in all its forms and manifestations did not rely on abstract hope or on the eternal spirit, but on the material principle in man himself. Man assimilated the cosmic elements: earth, water, air, and fire; he discovered them and became vividly conscious of them in his own body. He became aware of the cosmos within himself.... We must here stress that it was in the material acts and eliminations of the body—eating, drinking, defecation, sexual life—that man found and retraced within himself the earth, sea, air, fire, and all the cosmic matter and its manifestations, and was thus able to assimilate them. (335-36)

Moreover, the mandalas/orifices are, literally, an example of the text being turned upside down; it is an inversion of the culturally-accepted norm. Bakhtin situates inversion at the centre of carnival, arguing that it is essentially ambivalent, both negative and positive, destructive and renewing. Specifically, Bakhtin equates inversion with the clown's somersault:

> In hell Harlequin turns somersaults, leaps and skips, sticks out his tongue, and makes Charon and Pluto laugh. All these gay leaps and bounds are as ambivalent as the underworld itself. Harlequin's somersaults are topographical; their points of orientation are heaven, earth, the underworld, the top and the bottom. They present an interplay, a substitution of the face by the buttocks; in other words, the theme of the descent into hell is implicit in this simple acrobatic feat. (396-97)

In *The Second Panel*, the mandalas/orifices are textual somersaults. As such, they re-orient the text in all directions at once. It should also be noted that Bakhtin sees the somersault's symbolic descent into hell as positive: "The image of the nether world in folk tradition becomes the symbol of the defeat of fear by laughter. The fear is dual: the mystic terror inspired by hell and death and the terror of the authority and truth of the past, still prevailing but dying, which has been hurled into the underworld" (395). The textual somersaults are symbols of death and renewal, and are sites of inversion that, at least temporarily, overcome hierarchies.

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Monday, December 15, 2003

There is a deeply anarchic core to McCaffery's project in *Carnival*. This anarchy is present in Language Writing in general, derived from its concerns to attack hierarchies, binaries, and reified systems of thought. For example, McCaffery, in his 1977 essay "Diminished Reference and the Model Reader," (an essay published just two years after the completion of *The Second Panel*) states that

> The writing proposed is less the exclusive code of the author, theologically transmitted *down* to a reader recipient than a productive field which a reader can enter to mobilize significations. Proposed then is a shift from sign consumption to sign production and a siting of meaning in a productive engagement with writing's indeterminacies. The texts will reveal little in the way of phenomenological description—they are what they can be and they demand a productive stance. Language Writing involves a fundamental repudiation of the socially defined functions of author and reader as the productive and consumptive poles respectively of a commodital axis. The main thrust of the work is hence political rather than aesthetic, away from the manufacture of formal objects towards a frontal assault on the steady categories of author and reader, offering instead the writer-reader function as a compound, fluid relationship of two interchangeable agencies within sign production and sign circulation. (14-15)

This attack on the categories of author and reader is a fundamental tenet of Language Writing, and it appears as a regular theme in *The Second Panel*: on page 2, the text commands that the reader "must write / upon it you must write / upon the page that there is / white upon the page"; this creative act of the reader, who is writing the text along with McCaffery, will allow the reader to gain a "penetration to the / white experience / between the words" (1). The reader will be able to move away from a passive acceptance of words as objects outside of her/his control, and will be able to relate to language as a living entity, an entity which both manipulates and can be manipulated.

This ability to engage language directly, with the reader in a position of equality to the author, breaks down the hierarchy of reader as the passive observer of the privileged author. This removal of hierarchy is an anarchic move, one that allows the reading individual to relate to the text as an individual, as opposed to as a representation of some ideal reader projected onto the text by the author. When McCaffery claims this is a political move, it is an anarchic move, one that supports the philosophy of political anarchy.

Likewise, the form of *The Second Panel* contains many anarchic elements. The text bits, the individual letters, the stamps, the mandalas, all these exist in a state of anarchic equality, with no hierarchies present: the text privileges neither sense nor nonsense, neither words nor letters, neither type nor stamp, etc. Moreover, the flatness of the completed panel emphasizes the physical space of language, as opposed to the ideological space often emphasized in texts through the prioritization of signification:

> what emerges through reference is the fabrication of an exterior that structures material language as the relationship of an 'inside' to an 'outside.' As an abstract, detached rule in affiliation with grammar, reference enters the flow of language to become immanent within the very thing it structures. The works here proposed [i.e. Language Writing] do not reproduce a world according to the logic of the referent. They flatly refuse that reproduction, and presenting themselves first and foremost as material entities—as much 'seen' as 'read'—they command a textual space as a lettered surface resisting idealist transformation. Their purpose is to restore writing and reading to a re-politicized condition as *work*" (McCaffery, "Diminished Reference and the Model Reader" 17)

This emphasis on the physical space of language grounds *The Second Panel* to the page as a material entity. This refusal to prioritize the signification aspect of language denies what McCaffery and other Language writers see as a complicity between referentiality and capitalist consumerism:

> The referential fetish in language is inseparable from the representational theory of the sign. Proposed as intentional, as always 'about' some extra-linguistic thing, language must always refer beyond itself to a corresponding reality.... The referential fetish thrives on the myth of transparent signification, on words as innocent, unproblematic sign-posts to a monological message or intention; it wants a message as a product to be consumed with as little attention as possible drawn to the word's dialectical engagements. (McCaffery, "Language Writing: from Productive to Libidinal Economy," 152)

The denial of language as *naturally* signifying draws attention to how the process of signification normalizes the drive of capitalist consumption: signification exchanges words for ideas; like money, a word is worthless in and of itself—it is only the ability to convert the word for an idea that gives the word value. This conversion normalizes the practice of exchange, and it seems natural to desire what the object can be exchanged for, not the object itself. An insatiable, unlocateable desire for an intangible *something* arises in the individual. *The Second Panel*, both through its refusal to privilege words (and the signification they bring with them), as well as its physical denial of depth, of the move from physical text to abstract idea, attempts to de-naturalize the exchange desire of consumer capitalism. Instead, what *The Second Panel* attempts to replace this exchange desire with is the drive for coproduction, for a community of equals. The exchange drive also naturalizes competition between individuals, a non-stop need to 'keep up with the Joneses'; by replacing this drive with a desire for coproduction, for cooperation between equals, *The Second Panel* attempts to naturalize the anarchist beliefs of unimpededness and interpenetration.

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Tuesday, December 16, 2003

McCaffery, in his essay "Bill Bissett: A Writing Outside Writing" (dated 1976-78), explains the important role that overprint plays in destroying the linear logic of text. He states that "Overprint (the layering of text over text to the point of obliterating all legibility) is Bissett's method of deterritorializing linguistic codes and placing language in a state of vertical excess. Overprint destroys the temporal condition of logic and causality, obliterating articulation and destroying message by its own super-abundance" (103). Overprint is a technique that appears constantly throughout *The Second Panel*, from the obliteration of much of the stamped message in the mandalas to the overprinting of the text bits (page 11 is a good example of both of these usages). However, rarely is the overprinting so severe in *The Second Panel* that it achieves the obliteration of all legibility. *The Second Panel* is a movement towards the super-abundance McCaffery finds in Bissett, but it does not fully get there. I think this shows a desire to maintain communication with the reader/viewer of *The Second Panel*, as opposed to the complete denial of message. As such, *The Second Panel* is not nearly as radically indeterminate an experiment as it could have been; it respects certain codes too much to completely undermine them. The result is a text that is either seeking a rapprochement between experimentalism and more standard forms of poetry, or else a text that is not fully ready to jump into the deep end of the pool.

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The use of grammar is an extremely important aspect of the critiques in *The Second Panel*. McCaffery, as well as many other Language writers, has drawn a direct distinction between grammar and power relations: "Grammar is a repressive mechanism designed to regulate the free flow of language.... Grammar precludes the possibility of meaning being an active, local agent functioning within a polymorphous, polysemous space of parts and sub-particles; it commands hierarchy, subordination and postponement" ("Bill Bissett: A Writing Outside Writing" 97-8). Grammar, then, is a repressive tool, one that is designed to keep language in check; it is how the possible overabundance of messages is limited into one consumable meaning. The "hierarchy, subordination and postponement" that grammar brings to language normalizes these aspects, all of which are important parts of consumer capitalism. When a text does not follow the rules of grammar, there is an immediacy about language; each word takes on an individual power, as opposed to the subordination of each word to the sentence that grammar imposes. The avoidance of grammar is an anarchistic movement, a desire to do away with hierarchy and postponement, to focus on the equality of words as words, as well as their immediacy (the word means on its own, in its own moment of being encountered by the reader, as opposed to meaning something only in conjunction with the words before and after it in the sentence). McCaffery places the opposition of a grammarless text within political terms (and specifically anarchistic terms):

> As a transcendent law, grammar acts as a mechanism that regulates the free circulation of meaning, organizing the fragmentary and local into compound, totalized wholes. Through grammatical constraints, the meanings coalesce into meaning.... Like capital, (its economic counterpart) grammar extends a law of value to new objects by a process of totalization, reducing the free play of the fragments to the status of delimited, organizing parts within an intended larger whole.... Grammar's law is a combinatory, totalizing logic that excludes at all costs any fragmentary life. It is clear that grammar effects a meaning whose form is that of a surplus value generated by an aggregated group of working parts for immediate investment into an extending chain of meaning. The concern of grammar homologizes the capitalistic concern for accumulation, profit and investment in a future goal. Language Writing, in contrast, emerges more as an expenditure of meanings in the forms of isolated active parts and for the sake of the present moment which the aggregative, accumulative disposition of the grammatical text seeks to shun. (McCaffery, "Language Writing: from Productive to Libidinal Economy" 151)

The Second Panel evokes these ideas overtly on page 16, when it announces that "from grammar comes a violence and a mustering of noise as chess is a mustering of space."

This desire to focus on the "isolated active parts" of the text appears in areas other than the lack of grammar. The use of disconnected, uncited text-bits removes each from the larger whole they were once a part of, as well as denying them this unity in *The Second Panel*; these text-bits remain isolated from each other, non sequiturs that the reader cannot easily relate to each other. Furthermore, the different forms of imprinting text onto the page also work to deny any accumulative drive; hand-written, stamped, typed, in red ink or black ink (and also in blue, green and purple in the full-colour version), occurring at different angles, overprinted or obscured by the cut along the edge of each page, the text constantly announces its isolated status. At several points, the text even draws the reader's attention to this use of dislocated space; in *The Second Panel*, there is "simply the structure of space becoming no more than a structural accommodation of space" (5). There is, then, no desire for accumulation of space into a larger whole.

But isn't this desire for isolated sections undermined by the fact that *The Second Panel* is, in fact, a panel? It is, after all, one large entity. I would argue that the answer is no. If the isolated parts of language are normally mustered together in such a way that they work together for "hierarchy, subordination and postponement," the completed panel denies all three of these aspects: there is no hierarchy in the panel, since all pieces are equally part of the whole (which means that there is no subordination, as well). Moreover, there is no postponement, since the entire panel functions synchronously as one complete entity; it is a picture made of language, a visual entity, and not just a linear text that is read diachronically. It is this synchronicity of *The Second Panel* that maintains the anarchistic equality of all pieces present.

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However, although *The Second Panel* usually avoids grammar, resulting in long, unpunctuated text blocks like those on page 6, there are also moments where grammar appears, such as in the report of the plane crash on page 14. The reader could disregard these relatively few moments as moments the text uses to draw attention to the lack of grammar elsewhere in the text; the reader could also disregard the grammar in these sections as being nothing more than a relic held over from the original texts from which McCaffery excised them, and as such the reader could view these grammatical sections as an attack on those original texts, a moment of carnivalesque mockery.

These moments of grammar would be much easier to disregard, however, if the grammarless text-bits were truly grammarless, and not just lacking punctuation. Take, for example, this long text-bit from page 16:

> the packaging of a consumer product
> most important here is the mere
> attitude complicity
> forces upon us an informing
> psychologically
> complex pressure
> towards an inattention
> is building

This passage is much more difficult to read on the page, as it is overprinted at moments, stretched out across the page and interrupted by other passages at other moments. However, in spite of these aspects, and in spite of the fact that there is no punctuation present, it is still possible to read the passage grammatically. The reader can supply the missing punctuation in order to read the passage *correctly*. The mere lack of punctuation, then, does not necessarily mean that the text lacks grammar; sentence structure is still very much apparent.

As a result, *The Second Panel* does not achieve the level of anarchistic equality to which it aspires, because grammar exists as a trace that is too strong in the reader's mind for the reader to completely do away with it when she reads the text.

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Chapter Two

"mumbo-jumbo palaver gibber blunder": Harryette Mullen's *Muse & Drudge*

Monday, January 12, 2004

Muse (selected entries from the *Oxford English Dictionary*, online version)

Noun:

- *Classical Mythol.* (Now usu. in form **Muse.**) Each of the nine goddesses regarded as presiding over and inspiring learning and the arts, esp. poetry and music.
- Chiefly *poet.* Usu. with *the*. The inspiration of poetry or song, invoked as if being the only Muse.
- *allusively*. The inspiring goddess of a particular poet; (hence) a poet's particular genius, the character of a particular poet's style. Also in extended use.
- A person (often a female lover) or thing regarded as the source of an artist's inspiration; the presiding spirit or force behind any person or creative act.
- *fig.* (in later use chiefly *humorous*). **the tenth Muse**, a person or thing considered to be a source of inspiration comparable to one of the Muses of mythology.
- A poem; a song, a melody. *Obs.*
- By metonymy: a person inspired by a Muse; a poet. Now *rare*.
- An act or period of musing; a spell of thoughtfulness or reflection. Also (*rare*) as a mass noun: profound meditation or abstraction; musing.
- ***to be at a muse***: to be perplexed or uncertain; to wonder. (With clause as object.) *Obs.*
- The fruit of a plantain or banana plant; a plant yielding such fruit (also ***muse tree***).
- A room, or part of a room, used for study or meditation; a study, a carrel. Cf. Museum.

Verb:

- *intr.* To be absorbed in thought; to meditate in silence; to ponder. Usu. with ***about*, *in*, *of*, *on*, *over*, *upon*.**
- *trans.* With interrogative clause as object: to ponder, reflect.
- *trans.* To ponder over, reflect upon; to contemplate, meditate on (a thing).
- *trans.* (*refl.*). To bring oneself *to* a particular state of mind by musing. *Obs. rare*.
- *trans.* With direct speech as object: to say or murmur meditatively.
- *intr.* To gaze meditatively; to look thoughtfully or intently. With *in*, *on*, *upon*. Also *fig.*
- *intr.* To be affected with astonishment or surprise; to wonder, marvel.
- *trans.* To marvel at. *Obs.*
- *trans.* To bewilder, cause puzzlement to (a person). *Obs. rare*.
- *intr.* To murmur discontentedly; to grumble, complain. *Obs.*
- *trans.* To complain of, grumble about. *Obs.*
- *trans.* To devise, to compose (a speech, etc.). *Obs.*
- *intr.* To wait or look expectantly. *Obs. rare*.

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Drudge (selected entries from the Oxford English Dictionary, online version)

Noun:

- One employed in mean, servile, or distasteful work; a slave, a hack; a hard toiler.

Verb:

- *intr.* To perform mean or servile tasks; to work hard or slavishly; to toil at laborious and distasteful work.
- *trans.* To subject to drudgery. *rare*.

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The title is an indeterminate signifier: is the reader commanded to muse and drudge over the text, to think on the text in a laborious way, or is the text declared as both an inspiration and a slog? Yes.

The title serves as a signifier towards something more than any—or even all—of the individual meanings of *muse* or *drudge*; in many ways, the most important word is the one that is also least obvious: *and*. Obscured both by its nature as a conjunction and by its inclusion in the text in ampersand form, *and* is nonetheless the key term of the title, the term that sets the tone for the text to come. *Muse & Drudge* is, above all else, a text of inclusivity, a text that revolves around the *both/and* binary of inclusion suggested in its title, as opposed to the *either/or* binary of exclusion that I as a reader tend to gravitate towards, in a desire to define in a precise manner. *Muse* and *drudge* are terms that oppose each other: the divine, the ethereal, the inspiring, the liberating, the thoughtful, the marvellous vs. the mundane, the ugly, the painful, the physical, the trapped. There is no connection between them. That is, unless one is created; the creation of that connection is what Mullen's text is concerned with. It is a text that glorifies the mixed, the tainted, the miscegenetic nature of existence, and as such the text works to shock the reader out of her/his desire for purity, for rigid definition, for all that is "purebred." The title defines life itself as a mixture, a hodgepodge of difference.

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The cover photograph emphasizes this mixture of muse and drudge. The woman appears to be in a state of spiritual connection, with her eyes closed and body tilted as though she is swaying. At the same time, she is singing or speaking this state of spiritual connection; the woman on the cover is a site of both the noumenal and the phenomenal, the spirit and the body, the word (God) and the word (speech). The black and white photograph heightens the black background and the woman's white robes, but it also heightens how these colours are both in the woman, as her "black" skin shines with "white" highlights. The spirit is made flesh, the flesh is made spirit; as such the body is an unfixed site of both flesh and spirit, to the extent that the body escapes definition as a physical or spiritual entity. The text, once again, denies the act of definition (or at least indefinitely postpone it) in an attempt to blur boundaries.

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The title's connotations, the Greek muse and the American slave, is also a site of mediation. *Muse* brings with it the Greek ideals of freedom, individuality, and democracy, while *drudge* forces an acknowledgment of captivity, suppression of individuality, and slavery. Mullen brings the Greeks, the progenitors of Western culture, into an uneasy relationship with the Americans, the current leaders of the free world. Both societies have depended on slave labour. Likewise, there is the fact that the ideal of equality put forth in both societies was an ideal that was not upheld in the day-to-day practice of the societies' written and unwritten laws. The physical realities of race, gender, social status, and economic status all temper the ideal, just as the ideals temper the physical realities and work towards overcoming them.

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The epigram from Callimachus is also a site announcing intermingling. It recommends to "Fatten your animal for sacrifice, poet, / but keep your muse slender" (n. pag.). The juxtaposition of mundane with spiritual, low with high, death with creation, at first might seem to be a moment of rigid contradiction, a moment that creates a strict either/or binary, separating the *muse* from the *drudge*. However, in the quotation taken from the "Prologue to the Aetia," the lines are spoken to Callimachus by the god Apollo:

> When I first put a tablet on my knees, the Wolf-God
>   Apollo appeared and said:
> "Fatten your animal for sacrifice, poet,
>   but keep your muse slender." (Callimachus 23-26)

In other words, the epigram comes to/through Mullen from god through man, and so it represents another area of intermingling. What once seemed singular and solid is actually double and interpenetrated.

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Wednesday, January 14, 2004

Perhaps the most immediate question *Muse & Drudge* confronts the reader with is the delineation between whole and part; specifically, is each quatrain a separate entity, a poem by itself? or is each quatrain a part of one book-length poem? Moreover, there are pages where the four quatrains share certain themes or ideas—are these pages a unit by themselves or part of a book-length whole?[34] I think that, once again, the answer lies in the *&*; each quatrain is separate and complete by itself, and part of a book-length poem. The poem(s) *Muse & Drudge* exemplify the Zen concepts of unimpededness and interpenetration. John Cage, in his essay "Composition as Process," explains these terms thusly:

> HE THEN SPOKE OF TWO QUALITIES: UNIMPEDEDNESS
> AND INTERPENETRATION. NOW THIS
> UNIMPEDEDNESS IS SEEING THAT IN ALL OF SPACE EACH THING AND
> EACH HUMAN BEING IS AT THE CENTER AND FURTHERMORE THAT EACH
> ONE BEING AT THE CENTER IS THE MOST HONOURED
> ONE OF ALL. INTERPENETRATION MEANS THAT EACH ONE OF THESE
> MOST HONOURED ONES OF ALL IS MOVING OUT IN ALL DIRECTIONS
> PENETRATING AND BEING PENETRATED BY EVERY OTHER ONE NO MATTER
> WHAT THE TIME OR WHAT THE SPACE. (46)

Each quatrain in Mullen's text is both complete in and of itself and a part of a larger whole; they flow into and out of each other, refer to each other obliquely or directly, are aware of the existence of surrounding quatrains, and, at the same time, each quatrain is important in itself, by itself. Because of this, the text is necessarily concerned with the resonances that exist, unwritten but omnipresent, between each quatrain. *Muse &*

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[34] Mullen acknowledges that the ordering of quatrains was somewhat arbitrary, but that there were attempts to create different levels of coherent sections within the text: "Because it is a book and because they're written on pages, I had to eventually determine an order. I tried to find in some cases thematic strands that could bind them together, or in some cases I may have written three or four together in one sitting that had some relationship to each other.… I think I just tried to feel, intuit, how the quatrains might be ordered. In some cases, there's a local order that may continue for a page, usually not longer than a page" (Bedient, 654).

Drudge is overtly a writerly text because of the importance of these resonances. Furthermore, the resonances preclude the existence of a finite or authoritative text: since so much of what the reader experiences in the process of reading *Muse & Drudge* is actually brought to or gleaned from the text by the individual reader supplying resonances, the text on the page is necessarily incomplete. The "final" quatrain in the text draws attention to both the reader's role in creating the text and to the text's incomplete nature:

> proceed with abandon
> finding yourself where you are
> and who you're playing for
> what stray companion (88).

This command lacks a subject; it is impossible to determine whether the command to proceed, to keep on creating the text beyond the physical limit of the book, applies to the reader or to the text itself. Consequently, I think the command refers to both the reader and to the text. The text implicitly acknowledges that the reader's life experiences that accumulate between each re-reading of the text are creative tools that will fashion more resonances between quatrains each time the reader encounters the text. Also, there is the implied suggestion that the reader can actually write her or his own quatrains, thus adding to the incomplete text and making Mullen's text only the beginning in an unknowable, uncollectable, illimitable world poem. In both the creation of further entries and in the creation of the resonances between quatrains, the text of *Muse & Drudge* plays the role of muse towards the reader, inspiring further heights of creativity.

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Mullen acknowledges the unimpeded and interpenetrative nature of *Muse & Drudge* in an interview with Calvin Bedient. In it, Mullen states that

> The writing of the poem [*Muse & Drudge*] is influenced by compositional strategies of the blues, because blues verses are actually shuffled and rearranged by the performer, so new blues can be composed on the spot essentially by using different material in different orders.

> Quatrains can be free standing and shuffled in and out of the work in the way that blues verses are shuffled in and out in any particular performance—that is one way that the echo of the blues enters the structure of the poem. (654)

Mullen openly acknowledges the incomplete, non-authoritativeness of the text. By doing so, she allows the reader to take a more active role, a role that could not only include writing additional verses, but also rearranging the verses in the text. In this sense, the ordering of the quatrains put forward by the book is only one possibility; any reading through the text, in whatever order of quatrains the reader wishes, is therefore no less correct or authoritative than the order Mullen has supplied.

The unimpeded and interpenetrative nature of the text, then, reaches beyond the level of quatrain to quatrain and includes the positions of reader and writer. The text does not solidly delineate either of these positions; Mullen and reader are both writers and readers at the same time. The reading of the text, then, calls into question the firm subject position usually given to the reader and to the writer. Unimpededness and interpenetration call for a re-examination of the reader's relationship not just with the text or with the author, but with the entire world. They draw attention to both the individual and collective nature of the individual reader, how the individual is both subject to the collective (society) and also influences that collective.

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One important aspect of the nature of the unimpededness and interpenetration of *Muse & Drudge* is that, for Mullen, these notions come from the African American tradition, specifically the blues tradition. Because of this, my use of a white avant-garde composer, John Cage, to define these terms brings up several points. Is this an area where race is also elided through unimpededness and interpenetration? If so, who benefits from this elision? The erasure of difference generally works to the benefit of the group with larger numbers and often works to encompass and assimilate minority groups. Mullen's grounding of the ideas of unimpededness and interpenetration, ideas which she refers to along the lines of "shuffling," should not be overlooked.

On the other hand, Cage's definition of the two terms comes directly from his contact with the Japanese Zen scholar Daisetz Suzuki, who is the "He" that Cage quotes in the definition of the two terms (offered above). While *Muse & Drudge* does not openly deal with Zen ideas, I think that Mullen's text situates itself as a place where race and ethnicities are also sites of unimpededness and interpenetration, where African American ideas filter and engage with Zen ideas, the result being a text that blurs the boundaries of race. Again, there are possible problems with such a blurring, but there are also possible benefits, as the text perforates lines that have often been used to hold individuals apart.

Douglas Barbour, in his comments on this chapter, asks if "the blurring [is] also enacted by the reader(s) as well as the text?" I would argue that the text performs this blurring in order to prod the reader to do the same; however, there is no guarantee that a reader will do so.

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Friday, January 16, 2004

Mullen states in her interview with Bedient that "my text [*Muse & Drudge*] is deliberately a multi-voiced text, a text that tries to express the actual diversity of my own experience living here, exposed to different cultures. 'Mongrel' comes from 'among.' Among others. We are among; we are not alone. We are all mongrels" (652). In this sense, *Muse & Drudge* champions its mongrel nature; it is a text that draws on black culture, white culture, classical Greek texts, popular American texts, English, Spanish, etc. It is a text that champions a literary and cultural miscegenation. Specifically, this miscegenation takes place at the level of language. References are multiple throughout, often doubling (or tripling, quadrupling, etc.) references to or from different racial, social, or class groups in one line of poetry. A tool that Mullen often uses to create this multiple layer of referencing is punning. For example, there is the quatrain

> History written with whitening
> Darkened reels and jigs
> Perform a mix of wiggle
> Slouch fright and essence of enigma (45)

Mullen explains that the first line is a reference to both Woodrow Wilson and *Birth of a Nation*: "Literally I was working with a quotation from President Woodrow Wilson about the film *Birth of a Nation*. He said it was history written with lightning" (Bedient 652). The punning correction of *lightning* to *whitening* brings multiple references clashing together; as Mullen comments about Wilson's statement, "[it is] often quoted when people are discussing *Birth of a Nation*. People talk about that film's technical genius and then they try to avoid in some discussions the actual racial content of the movie" (Bedient 652). The pun forces Wilson's (and other's) wilful blindness to the film's racism into contact with an explicit awareness of the film's racism. Mullen's punning conflates two opposing views into one; inside the quatrain, the text intricately joins these two views. The text does not seek to erase one view by privileging the other (Wilson's quotation is too strong a trace to be lost in Mullen's pun); instead, what the reader encounters is a moment of what could be termed *irreconcilable dissensus*, where conflicting views exist simultaneously within each other, each view necessarily also promoting its opposite. The irreconcilable dissensus is another moment of interpenetration and unimpededness.

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These moments of irreconcilable dissensus suggest a political philosophy behind Mullen's text (a text that uncharitable readers might disregard as nonsensical and thus apolitical in its refusal to offer an easily consumable set of ideas). Specifically, an emphasis on dissensus, which goes hand-in-hand with an emphasis on interpenetration and unimpededness, promotes an ideological stance that privileges active, unreifiable thinking. Thomas Docherty explains that

> In a debate with Rorty — who shares with Habermas a faith in some kind of 'conversation' — Lyotard indicates that there is a 'soft imperialism', a 'conversational imperialism' at work in the drive to establish consensus between participants in a dialogue. Only if we respect — and stress — the heterogeneity of language-games will we save the possibility of thinking. In short, this means that it is only in the refusal of consensus and in the search for 'dissensus' that we will be able

> to extend thinking, to allow it to be shocked into the new, the (chronological) postmodern. Consensus is a means of arresting the flow of events, a mode whereby eventuality can be reduced to punctuality; it is a way of reducing the philosophy of Becoming to a philosophy of Being. The modernist assumes that it is possible to pass from Becoming to Being; the postmodernist believes that any such move is always necessarily premature and unwarranted. (25-6)

Mullen's refusal to accept consensus in her text retains the heterogeneity of truly active thought. *Muse & Drudge* respects differing points of view, even those that it implicitly argues against, such as Wilson's. This irreconcilable dissensus forces the reader of the text to remain in a state of Becoming in relation to the text; both reader and text remain in a state of uncertainty, which in turn denies the reification of Being.

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Mullen's text suggests, then, that the state of Becoming is intricately linked with the inclusive binary of both/and, as opposed to the exclusive binary of either/or. With the former, every decision is necessarily arbitrary, and is obviously only one possibility among many. With every interpretive decision that the reader confronts, then, the list of possible outcomes expands exponentially.

Possibly more than anything else, it is this emphasis on the arbitrary nature of the reader's interpretive decisions that locates *Muse & Drudge* as a postmodern text, because it forces the reader into an awareness of the arbitrary nature of her/his decision-making process. At once freeing and terrifying, this awareness constructs the individual as the site of textual "truth." This insight moves outside the realm of textual interpretation. As Mullen states, "self-determination applies not just to the poet or the voice or voices within the poem [*Muse & Drudge*] but to all people. All the people have access to means of self-determination" (Bedient 653). Once the reader realizes the arbitrary nature of interpretive decisions, s/he gains an awareness that the self is also a text comprised of more or less arbitrary decisions; this awareness, in turn, exposes the self as a text open to an infinite number of choices. Consequently, the self maintains a free-flowing, unreifiable nature similar to that given the text of *Muse & Drudge*.

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Monday, January 19, 2004

In her article "African Signs and Spirit Writing," Mullen has this to say about Henry Louis Gates's belief that African-American writing is a speakerly tradition:

> From the "talking book" featured in early slave narratives, to "dialect poetry" and the "speakerly text" the Afro-American tradition that Gates constructs and canonizes is that which seeks to "speak" to readers with an "authentic black voice." Presumably, for the African-American writer, there is no alternative to production of this "authentic black voice" but silence, invisibility, or self-effacement. This speech based and racially inflected aesthetic that produces a "black poetic diction" requires that the writer acknowledge and reproduce in the text a significant difference between the spoken and written language of African-Americans and that of other Americans. (670)

With all the African-American phrases and references in *Muse & Drudge*, it seems obvious at first that Mullen's book fits into this category of authentic black voice. However, Mullen's book is by no means merely speakerly. Her references to Sappho (1), film (45), the visual arts (58), ancient mythology (64), and foreign literary styles (40), to mention just a few, reach outside oral culture and towards an intimate knowledge of a variety of different texts. Moreover, the multiple puns found throughout the text often play off the reader's knowledge of other texts: for example, the quatrain "Jesus is my airplane / I shall feel no turbulence / though I fly in a squall / through the spleen of Satan" (76) requires the reader to be familiar with Psalm 23 in order to note its humour. In fact, in her article Mullen openly disagrees with Gates's privileging of the speakerly text:

> I would like to argue that any theory of African-American literature that privileges a speech based poetics, or the trope of orality, to the exclusion of more writerly texts will cost us some impoverishment of the tradition…. I would not worry so much about the criteria Gates has set for inclusion in his canon, if it did not seem to me that the requirement

> that a black text be "speakerly" will inevitably exclude certain African-American texts that draw more on the culture of books, writing, and print than they do on the culture of orality. ("African Signs" 670-1)

Obviously, a large part of Mullen's problem with Gates's opinion is that it narrows the type of book that is "truly" African-American. As a pluralist, Mullen wants to see a multitude of difference in African-American writing, and therefore finds Gates's definition too limiting. However, this is only a part of Mullen's problem with Gates's opinion.

In her argument against Gates, Mullen draws on the tradition of the slave narrative. While there is little argument that such texts are speakerly, what Mullen emphasizes is the liberating nature of literacy that is found in these narratives:

> The texts of ex-slave narratives signal a decisive movement of literate African Americans toward self-empowerment through the tools and technologies of literacy that are productive of bourgeois subjectivity, and away from the degradation imposed by slavery and compulsory illiteracy. The zealous pursuit of literacy embodied by ex-slave narrators, particularly [Frederick] Douglass, is an astute response to the disastrous assault on the collective cultural identities of African captives whose orally transmitted forms of knowledge brought from their various ethnic groups had been submerged, fragmented, or rendered irrelevant within a dominant bourgeois white culture that characterized whatever remained within slave culture of coherent African traditional aesthetic and spiritual systems as superstitious beliefs of primitive people. (673)

What literacy brought to the ex-slaves was not only a sense of identity, of subjectivity, but a sense of individuality. Individuality is based on an awareness of difference, uniqueness, something that the slave system worked hard to deny African-Americans. I think that implied in Mullen's desire for a multiplicity of African-American writing styles is an awareness that there is a constant threat that the predominantly white US culture could reduce African-Americans (along with any other racial, gender, or religious group, etc., that constitutes a minority) to a monolithic whole, an act that robs the members of that group of their individuality by replacing individual diversity with a set of limited and limiting stereotypes. Considering the prevalence of outdated racial stereotypes surrounding African Americans, a call for diversity takes on a political nature, as diversity openly denies the accuracy of such stereotypes. *Muse & Drudge*, then, through its constant references to texts from diverse areas, along with its punning (which claims an intimate awareness and subjective control over these texts) carries a political cry for diversity in the African American community.

Moreover, Mullen's desire to create more writerly African-American texts is also a call to other African Americans to take a more active role in the creative process. This obviously has serious ramifications for the African-American reader, who would have to take a more active, aware position, but also to the African-American writer. By creating an African-American writerly text, the writer openly displays an ability to shape received ideas, forms, phrases, thoughts, etc., into something new. This ability to take an active role in defining the world in which they live seems particularly important to members of a minority group, since the majority populace often wittingly or unwittingly shapes the creative forces that promote and naturalize the society's ideology.

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Wednesday, January 21, 2004

In reference to early slave culture, Mullen asks:

> How was the uniformity of print received by a folk culture in which perfect symmetry and straight, unbroken lines were avoided, an aesthetic preference for irregularity and variation that folklorist Gladys-Marie Fry [in her book *Stitched from the Soul: Slave Quilts from the Antebellum South*] attributes to "the folk belief of plantation slaves that evil spirits follow straight lines" (67). ("African Signs and Spirit Writing" 672)

I think this remark offers intriguing insights into *Muse & Drudge*. For one thing, it uncovers a traditional preference for texts that don't follow straight lines. While this is specifically in regards to physical lines, I believe it also applies to semantic lines. In other words, *Muse & Drudge*, in its non sequitur shifts from quatrain to quatrain, refuses to trust in a straight line of thought; instead, similar to the slaves, there is a preference for angular thinking, for unexpected turns of thought. By this, I don't intend to suggest that Mullen's text in any way proves that African Americans have not progressed in their thinking over the centuries, or that Mullen's writing avoids linearity in order to avoid "evil spirits." Instead, I think that *Muse & Drudge* attempts to maintain a connection with its African-American forerunners, forging a link between illiterate slaves and the highly literate African-American authors of today.[35]

Moreover, while discussing Robert Farris Thompson's article "The Song that Named the Land: The Visionary Presence in African-American Art," Mullen draws a connection between the distrust of linearity in printed text, spiritually inspired writing, and African culture:

> Thompson notes that in African-American folk culture the printed text may provide ritual protection, as newspapers are used by "black-home architects" who "papered the walls of their cabins with newsprint to confuse jealous spirits with an excess of information," and writing may be employed to enclose and confine evil presences, as in the spirit-script of visionary artist J.B. Murray. In what looks like illiterate scribbling or a handwriting exercise, Murray's noncommunicative spirit-writing or "textual glossolalia," Thompson finds an African-American manifestation of what may be a surviving element of Kongo prophetic practices in which a unique illegible script produced in a trance-like state functions as a graphic representation of spirit possession, "a visual equivalent to speaking in tongues" ([Lynne] Adele, [*Black History/ Black Vision: The Visionary Image in Texas*,] 14). (672)

In the African and the African-American tradition, spirit possession, or speaking in tongues, takes the form of an inspired writing, a writing that appears to be non-sensical; the relation to being inspired by the muse, as Mullen's text is, should be obvious. What I would like to stress here is that, despite its apparently radically innovative form, *Muse*

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[35] This refusal to follow a straight line of thought can also be seen in the novels of Toni Morrison and Ishmael Reed, as well as in the poetry of Amiri Baraka and Nathaniel Mackey, to name just a few.

& Drudge's form has fundamental connections to its cultural history.

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The above section argues for a connection between Mullen's form and African-American culture, and sets this connection up against the normative, white (or at least Western) tradition of the Muse. However, there is also a strong body of evidence suggesting that the muse that Mullen draws on is not necessarily Western.

Mullen herself puts forward a strong claim for an African-American muse tradition. She writes that "a reading of 19th-century African-American spiritual narratives suggests that, like music, the act of reading or writing, or the process of acquiring literacy itself may be a means for the visionary writer to attract a powerful presence to inhabit a spiritually focused imagination or a blank sheet of paper" ("African Signs" 672). This statement upholds the Western muse-model of the writer, which I believe situates the writer as the passive tool of a higher power; however, Mullen goes on to show that the African-American tradition adapted the Western muse-model in order to make it fit its own tradition of spirit possession:

> An African-American tradition of literacy as a secular technology and a tool for political empowerment, through appropriation of public symbols, and participation in mainstream cultural discourses, co-exists with a parallel tradition of visionary literacy as a spiritual practice in which divine inspiration, associated with Judeo-Christian biblical tradition, is syncretically merged with
> African traditions of spirit possession.... ("African Signs" 673)

The muse-model, then, is an area of syncretization in *Muse & Drudge.* There is no reason to believe that the muse Mullen refers to is Erato or Calliope; in light of the strong African-American resonances the term carries, it is just as reasonable to argue that Mullen's muse is the African-American tradition itself, especially considering the emphasis on non-linear thought in African-American tradition:

> [Robert Farris] Thompson imaginatively suggests that, just as in African and diasporic forms of oral expression, from the pygmy yodel to the field holler of the slave, from the blues wail to the gospel hum, from the

> bebopping scat of the jazz singer to the nonsense riffs erupting in the performance of the rap, dub, or reggae artist, it is apparent that the voice may be "unshackled" from meaningful words or from the pragmatic function of language as a conveyor or cognitive information, so the written text, as spirit-script, may be unshackled from any phonetic representation of human speech or graphic representation of language. ("African Signs" 672)

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Friday, January 23, 2004

Mullen's text, as one inspired by the muse, shares distinct concerns with the earliest African-American writings, especially the concern for freedom. Speaking of Denmark Vesey and Nat Turner, two leaders of African-American slave revolts, Mullen states:

> Vesey, a free black, and Turner, a slave, sought to forge leadership at the interface of African orality / spirituality and an African-American visionary literacy founded on a prophetic reading of the Bible.... Turner's insurrection relied upon his reading of "signs in the heavens" and "hieroglyphic characters" he had "found on the leaves in the woods" which corresponded with "the figures [he] had seen in the heavens," as well as his application of biblical prophecy to the historical circumstances of slavery in the United States. ("African Signs" 678)

Mullen's musings in *Muse & Drudge* are obviously not concerned with the abolition of slavery; however, in their concern to forge a creative, writerly African-American literary presence, they call for freedom of choice. Moreover, there are constant calls for African-American culture to be free from the dominating, reshaping, and colonizing nature of white American culture. When Mullen writes:

> muse of the world picks
> out stark melodies
> her raspy fabric
> tickling the ebonies

> you can sing their songs
> with words your way
> put it over to the people
> know what you doing (*Muse & Drudge* 17)

there is an implicit argument: black culture is creative, the black (ebony) body is the site where the muse works and creates music; however, the white community (which I read here as the colonizing "you" of the latter stanza) usurps and rewrites black culture in such a way as to whitewash it with "white covers of black material" (32). Mullen calls for an independence, a room of one's own, if you will, for African-American culture, a place where it is safe from the colonizing touch of white America.

Furthermore, the prophetic text can go beyond merely arguing for the freedom of a group of people and their culture; the text itself can actually offer proof of the writer's freedom. The presence of the muse frees the prophetic writer of personal and communal responsibility. In the quotation above, Turner is merely a conduit, an interpreter, and so is more free to express his insights without fear of condemnation. A better example comes from the African prophetic tradition:

> The position of being an individual with a capacity to articulate freely is expressed by the Songhai of Mali as: "I am a voice from elsewhere free to say exactly what they want"... Because he voices the thoughts of others, the speaker is not implicated, constrained, or held back in the speaking. His freedom to speak is not contingent upon what he has to say. He can make something happen—invent, undermine, posit, play—without it seeming that he is the one doing it. The speaker is not to be located in the situation he represents or creates with his speech and its concomitant assumptions and ideas. Some part of the speaker is always some place else. Therefore, no matter what happens as a result of the speaking, he is never fully captured, analyzed, apprehended, or pinned down by the listeners. Although this notion sounds like a Western deconstruction position toward identity in general, the difference in the Songhai context is that this notion is consciously recognized as the

> precondition for speaking in general and descriptive of the psychological orientation assumed toward speaking. (Timothy Simone, qtd in "African Signs and Spirit Writing" 682)

The prophetic writer, then, escapes reification, since the words are never truly "just his own." This free space is where the freedom of personal agency and fluid subjectivity maintain a safe accessibility for the minority writer.

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The quotation immediately above also offers another major insight into *Muse & Drudge*: its experimental, progressive form is not necessarily inherited from the western (white) avant-garde movements. Fluidity, lack of linear progression or linear logic, openness to the magical, playfulness, indeterminacy: these are all elements of the avant-garde tradition, and so it is easy to assume that is what Mullen is drawing on in her writing. However, there is an alternate source, again from the African-American tradition, that is more appropriately Mullen's inspiration:

> In traditional African cultures, the surfaces, depths, and beyonds were barely distinguishable from each other. Oscillating the demarcations with his own movements, man was simultaneously located in every dimension. Imprecision, fuzziness, and incomprehension were the very conditions which made it possible to develop a viable knowledge of social relations. Instead of these conditions being a problem to solve by resolute knowledge, they were viewed as the necessary limits to knowledge itself, determined by the value in which such knowledge was held, and the attitudes taken toward it. (Timothy Simone, qtd in "African Signs and Spirit Writing" 681)

The unimpededness and interpenetration that I argued earlier are not necessarily fair terms to use, since they come from the white European/North American avant-garde. The terms "imprecision, fuzziness, and incomprehension," which I read as "unimpededness and interpenetration," are more appropriate to *Muse & Drudge*.

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There is also a specifically feminine aspect to Mullen's work. *Muse & Drudge* draws on specifically female African-American traditions, such as the quilt. In her interview with Calvin Bedient, Mullen states that "I might have used another form [for *Muse & Drudge*], you know, there are poets who have used what look like recipe cards poems, as Robert Grenier has poems on cards that the reader can shuffle. My poem might have had that kind of form. But [it couldn't] because I had to set it in a book..." (654). Consequently, each quatrain can stand on its own, but only as a discrete part of the whole, much the same way that quilts are composed of discrete parts. In "African Signs and Spirit Writing," Mullen states that

> Gladys-Marie Fry shows that slave women making quilts for their own families rejected the patterns found in quilting copybooks they had followed when supervised by their mistresses. They used opportunities to make their own quilts as occasions for enjoying their own oral expressiveness, and preferred their own cultural aesthetic when it came to making quilts for their own use. (687)

Independence, personal creativity, communal interplay—all these aspects from the quilting parties are present in Mullen's text. And, while I have earlier argued for the writerly as opposed to the speakerly aspects of Mullen's text, there can be no denying that *Muse & Drudge* functions through the spoken word, through the rich weavings of aural puns, slang pronunciations, and rhythms that become obvious only after the poem is read aloud. This emphasis on talk, on conversation is another major part of African-American quilting:

> The glue that helped cement the fragile and uncertain existence of slave life was their oral lore. It was an ever-present force—sometimes the main event, as in the slave quilting party—and sometimes the background even while slaves sewed, mended, knitted, and such. But present it was. While the official learning of the master's literate world was denied the slave, it was the slave's oral lore that taught moral lessons, values, attitudes, strategies for survival, rites of passage, and humor! Folklore helped to preserve the slaves' sense of identity, of knowing who they were and how they perceived the world. Folk

> traditions also served as a buffer between the slaves and a hostile world, both on and off the plantation. For it was in the slave quarters that African traditions first met and intersected with Euro-American cultural forms. What emerged were transformations, adaptations, and reinterpretations. (Gladys-Marie Fry, qtd in "African Signs and Spirit Writing," 687-8)

By conversing with the reader, making the reader take an active role in the text's creation, *Muse & Drudge* creates a sense of community. This reading community is obviously not strictly defined along racial lines. In this sense, *Muse & Drudge* updates the folklore tradition with a new inclusiveness by inviting non-black readers to take part in the joy of the African-American community's creativity. This interplay, however, more equal, more generous, than the white colonizing of black culture that takes place when an outsider encounters and steals African-American culture. The text specifically invites the reader into the community as one more quilter, and the reader therefore takes on the role of a co-creator of culture. In a seemingly oxymoronic way, I believe that *Muse & Drudge* welcomes in non-black readers in order to highlight and even preserve the uniqueness of African-American culture.

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Monday, January 26, 2004

Mullen openly champions the idea of a miscegenated American culture. In reference to *Muse & Drudge*, Mullen states that

> A lot has been said of how American culture is a miscegenated culture, how it is a product of a mixing and mingling of diverse races and cultures and language, and I would agree with that. I would say that, yes, my text is deliberately a multi-voiced text, a text that tries to express the actual diversity of my own experience living here, exposed to different cultures. 'Mongrel' comes from 'among.' Among others. We are among; we are not alone. We are all Mongrels. (Bedient 652)

We are all mongrels? This statement at first seems to support the interpenetration and unimpededness (or the imprecision, fuzziness, and incomprehension) of Mullen's text.

However, this is an all-inclusive statement; there is no escaping mongrelization. No firm racial boundaries exist. While this is true to a degree in the US, (or, I would argue, in small parts of the US), I don't believe the sense of social camaraderie truly exists in an often racially polarized country like the US (and like Canada, too). Does Mullen's notion of mongrelization rely on a dismissal of actual racial differences and tensions in North American society, and thus naively promote a sense of racial equality that simply doesn't exist?

This question has larger ramifications than just contemporary poetry and poetics. As Stuart Hobbs has argued in his book *The End of the American Avant Garde*, artists can often unwittingly promote a view of society that they intend to critique. Hobbs argues that the 1950s avant garde's opposition to American values was actually incorporated into American political and intellectual life as proof of America's diversity and freedom: "These painters became weapons in the Cold War of ideas. Their themes of alienation and cultural renewal were deemphasized by MOMA curators, who presented the works as representative of the freedom of the non-Communist world" (121). Thus, the avant garde's protests actually strengthened such vague American values as *democracy* and *freedom of speech*. I think a similar situation occurs in *Muse & Drudge*. Mullen openly criticises white America for its racism, its historical oversights, and its willingness to colonize African-American culture. However, by presenting a text that also promotes American culture as a vibrant mixture of black, white, Hispanic, and other cultures, *Muse & Drudge* implies that American culture is a site where cultures can enter into free exchange; the text obscures the notion that white American culture looms large over all other cultures in the country, colonizing, stealing, appropriating from all others. Consequently, the poem presents a false equality to the reader.

Moreover, since this false equality comes from a member of a minority culture, the reader is further assured of its objectivity. After all, it is one thing for a white man to say "We are all mongrels"; it is something very different for an African American woman to say it. Mullen's gender and skin colour, quite simply, give her statement the credibility that would be lacking if a white male said it. It seems, then, that Mullen's text might be more conservative than progressive: the criticisms that it offers in content are undone by its form. Furthermore, the criticisms that the content offers are usually in "safe" areas of criticism, areas where white America has already acknowledged its past sins (such is the case, I would argue with the "white covers of black material" [32]). This conservatism suggests a certain privileging of the status quo in *Muse & Drudge*, as opposed to any progressive message for change.

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At the same time, I should point out that the criticisms I offer of *Muse & Drudge* come from a white, middle class, academic male. There is possibly a dangerous oversight in my argument, one that criticizes the minority writer for not being more brave (and also defines for the writer what "bravery" must be), or more progressive, with the implicit model being the white, middle class academic male himself. *I* would have been more direct; *I* would have criticized America more strongly, etc. However, this leaves intact the hierarchy that privileges the knowing white man over the naïve black woman, which is a hierarchy that the white male critic can unconsciously uphold if he is not careful.

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Something else to take notice in Mullen's comments on miscegenated American culture is that she is speaking specifically about culture, not society. While it is possible to conflate these two terms, it might not be fair to assume Mullen is doing so (as I certainly have).

Still, the possibility that Mullen's experiment is rather conservative deserves further investigation.

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Wednesday, January 28, 2004

Muse & Drudge holds a self-contradictory relationship towards memory. One the one hand, the individual's memory, both the reader's and the speaker's, is practically nonexistent due to the poem's form; on the other hand, *Muse & Drudge* has a vast cultural memory, particularly of African-American culture.

As Calvin Bedient states, "if *Muse and Drudge* is postmodernism, it's postmodernism with a memory" (655). Specifically, Bedient refers to the text's cultural memory, which appears continuously through the multiplicity of allusions. The speaker displays a dizzying memory, referring to Sappho, blues standards, and jazz speakeasies on the first page alone. Throughout, the poem repeatedly brings in African, African-American, Ancient Greek, white American, as well as other histories. Mullen links this reservoir of cultural memory to the speaker's self-determination:

> Also the self or the selves in the poem come from a tradition; there's a recycling of tradition in the making of the self. The making of the voice in the poem is the recycling of tradition. So these things are not independent of each other. One feeds the other. Any time "I" is used in the poem, it's practically always quotation: it comes from a blues song, or it comes from a line of Sappho; it comes from—wherever it comes from. The "I" in the poem is almost always someone other than myself, and often it's an anonymous "I," a generic "I," a traditional "I," the "I" of the blues, that person who in reference to any individual experience also speaks for the tradition, speaks for the community, and the community recognizes the individuality of the speaker and also claims something in common. (Bedient 653)

Cultural memory creates the speaker's self through cultural memory, piece by piece, memory by memory, quatrain by quatrain. In this sense, the speaker constantly creates and recreates herself; she is in the fluctuating state of Becoming, as opposed to the flattened state of Being. This emphasis on cultural memory places the individual speaker of the text into a relationship with community.

It seems reasonable to refer to this cultural memory as a sort of long-term memory. While *Muse& Drudge*'s long-term memory is vibrant and assured, its short-term memory is practically nonexistent. Through the repetitive quatrain form, there is no linear construction to the text; instead, it swirls around itself, avoiding any teleology. The result is that both the speaker and the reader suffer from short term memory loss. The reader is unable to remember what was just said, which leaves him only with vague images and disconnected phrases. As a reader, I know the speaker while I am reading *Muse & Drudge*, but I am unable to offer specific descriptions of the speaker when I try to remember after I finish reading. The text's form works as an anti-mnemonic device, in that it defeats the reader's attempt to place narrativise the text and thus remember it clearly. Oddly enough, this lack of memory is also part of the speaker's self-determination:

> BEDIENT: And the form of the poem itself seems to foster, in fact to depend entirely on, self-determination. That is to say, the form is not "inevitable," developmental. A few consecutive quatrains may dwell on the same subject—for example, the movie industry that we were just referring to—but not necessarily in an argumentatively developmental way. The poem as a whole is like repetitive musics, in that what matters is the beat, a beat that does not, so to speak, accumulate time. Traditional form recognizes time and development. This form does not rely on memory; yes, the quatrain form is remembered, and that's a kind of automatism, but at the same time continual invention is being asked of you, constant renewals of self-determination, an accumulation of atemporal contents.
>
> MULLEN: I would say the self-determination applies not just to the poet or the voice or voices within the poem but to all people. All the people have access to means of self-determination. (Bedient 653)

This lack of short-term memory (which I could also refer to as personal memory), then, allows for personal liberty. Both the speaker and the reader constantly re-invent themselves; in a sense, both are perpetual *tabulae rasae*, in that what the text says constantly fades as it speaks a new quatrain. All that truly remains is the form itself, along with disconnected cultural memories/references. Moreover, because these cultural memories are necessarily free-floating due to the disjunctive form of the poem, the reader picks and chooses from them in order to continue the process of self-determination after he/she has finished reading the text.

Because of this interplay of stable cultural memory and unstable personal memory, the model of self-determination that Mullen puts forward in the poem is one where contact with the surrounding culture, not an innate subjectivity, shapes the individual. Dialogic interplay determines the self by focusing the individual on looking outward towards the world, as opposed to synchronically looking inwards.

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The self-determination of the speaker in *Muse & Drudge* carries a particularly pointed message to black Americans. The mixing and intermingling of different cultural references, all within the black form of the blues quatrains, subtly argues the need for a diverse, multifaceted black culture. Mullen herself points out that there is no one "black experience" in America:

> certain things I thought of as being traditionally black because that was the example of my community, my family didn't necessarily do all those things, because they came from another region and spoke the language differently and had different customs and so forth; so there's already this kind of disruption in the notion of a black identity or a black subject. This book [*Muse & Drudge*] is partly trying to enlarge what the black culture or the black tradition might be. So there's that sense of black people having various cultural references and different languages that are spoken and different geographical regions and different communities, different religious practices. I think the Sixties were about constructing a unified, almost monolithic black culture and I think that we're now more engaged in seeing the differences within, and that leads to multiple cultural references that are part of the input. (Bedient 655-6)

Consequently, when Mullen refers to non-African culture, there is an understanding that no culture can exist alone today; there must be a meaningful interplay between cultures in order to avoid developing a monolithic, reified Culture.

One particular way this interplay works in *Muse & Drudge* is through acknowledging the areas different cultures share. For example, there is the inclusion of Spanish in the poem. As Mullen explains, Spanish is an intersection between cultures, since it is spoken by more than one racial group:

> One of my elementary school teachers when I was still in a little segregated black school was a man from Panama, who was a native

> Spanish speaker, bilingual, so I identified Spanish also with black people as well as Mexican Americans. The Spanish is there [in *Muse & Drudge*] partly because I think it's a beautiful language and partly because I associate it with people who were a part of my life. I use it in a political way, because I think we should all have more than one language.... People in Africa routinely speak three or more languages. (Bedient 652)

Underlying this statement is an understanding of racial and cultural interchange; although dominant white America wanted no part of this exchange, to the point where laws sought to prevent it in the name of white "purity," such notions of purity were necessarily false in the twentieth century (if not long before that).

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Friday, January 30, 2004

In an almost stereotypical move, music is perhaps the most particularly African-American aspect of *Muse & Drudge*. The text borrows its quatrain stanzas and the generic "I" from the blues; the punning, intricate word use and double entendres come as much from jazz as from the poetic tradition. Mullen acknowledges the importance of these traditions, and deals with them both in terms of gender:

> I was thinking about this poem [*Muse & Drudge*] in terms of musical tradition, blues and jazz, and women's voices have been very important in blues and jazz. It's been interesting because the female vocal singer has been more important than the female instrumentalist. This connects with the poem: for instance, in the beginning there's "Sapphire's lyre" and then "styles / plucked eyebrows," so that there's an association of the woman's body with her instrument.... The woman's body is her instrument; in the jazz tradition, at least, the instrument she's playing is her own voice, so there the woman's voice is very important and women are very important in the construction of the blues. You know the old blues man said, "If it weren't for women we wouldn't have the blues." (Bedient 658)

Mullen brings jazz and blues together in such a way that their differences towards female subjectivity come into contrast: in the jazz tradition women have active speaking (singing) roles, which means that women have both a literal and figurative creative voice; blues, however, traditionally treats women as an object, a site of trouble, something that brings the implicitly and explicitly male speaker pain.

Is there a contradiction here? Can *Muse & Drudge* use blues forms without inviting in its masculine tradition, a tradition that disregards women? Or is Mullen consciously inverting the blues norm? I think that Mullen's intention is certainly the latter. She states that "Partly what the poem is doing is reclaiming the black woman's body, so that the body is hers, something that she can enjoy, because so many people have tried to define and limit and imprison her body and her sexuality. The idea is that she can be in charge: she can play her own instrument, and she can play the tune that she wants on the instrument" (Bedient 659). This emphasis on the sexual nature of women's bodies carries with it the underlying risk that the poem will sexualize women, which carries with it the dangers of the blues temptress: women as object of pain. However, *Muse & Drudge* sexualizes women from a woman's point of view, and I believe this is an important difference; there is a female subjectivity at work in the sexuality. Consequently, when the third stanza of *Muse & Drudge* states that

> you've had my thrills
> a reefer a tub of gin
> don't mess with me I'm evil
> I'm in your sin, (1)

the poem claims female sexuality as a source of agency. Sexuality becomes a site of power for women, as opposed to being a site of pain for men. The change in perspective shifts in such a way that women are no longer the object, the dehumanized site of male desire; instead, female sexuality is recuperated, as it brings a source of strength for women in Mullen's poem.

Moreover, Mullen is careful to avoid any essentializing generalizations on the nature of femininity and female sexuality. As with so much of the text, the presentation of difference is critical:

> There's a range of representations from the diva to the debased

> woman—the muse, the drudge. Those are the polarities. Those are the extreme oppositions that we see in representations of black women in the media. Either the fabulous diva or the mother using crack, the prostitute. The super-skinny black model versus Aunt Jemima. I was interested in more of a continuum, filling in or troubling those kinds of oppositional constructions of black women. (Bedient 660)

This continuum of black female subjectivity ensures that no one idea or style of sexuality will dominate the text. As a result, female subjectivity and sexuality escape the reification that society often places on "the sexual woman," a term that still conjures up negative connotations in North American society today (especially when compared to the positive representations surrounding the virile, "manly," sexual man).

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There are a myriad of allusions throughout *Muse & Drudge*, so much so that it is impossible for any one reader to understand, or even notice all of them. However, the *over*abundance of allusions plays an important role in the text, since it necessarily places the text outside the complete comprehension of any reader, denying the reader's ability to master the poem. In her interview with Calvin Bedient, Mullen states:

> No, I didn't think about that [including notes to the poem]. I thought that the music of the poem would carry any reader through the poem. And whether they understood every line or not is not really essential to me. I want them to hear it as poetry; I want them to get flashes and glimpses of recognition that come from their own experience and connect with parts of the poem that are familiar…. (664)

Understanding, then, is secondary to experience. This idea is particularly important in relation to the audience that Mullen wants for *Muse & Drudge*: there is a desire for a diverse, multi-ethnic reading community, since all readers can experience the text, but no group of readers can completely understand the full allusivity of the text.

Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly, the overabundance of allusions dismantles the reading audience as a whole, denying any one reading group a privileged place. *Muse & Drudge* is part African-American, part continental avant garde, part jazz, part blues, part Sappho, part puzzle, part pun, part political statement—and much more. This openness to different influences creates an openness to different traditions in the reader:

> I wrote this book to bring the various readers of my work together. In the work that I have done, the three books that preceded this one, *Tree Tall Woman* had probably a larger black audience than *Trimmings* and *S*PeRM**K*T* had, and this book was my attempt to continue the innovative technique that emerged in the writing of *Trimmings* and *S*PeRM**K*T* , and to use a recognizable cultural content, while at the same time expanding that beyond a fairly simple or reductive notion of what black culture is. I was trying to make a text that did address various audiences, and so the various registers and different lexicons and different allusive potentials had to do with that diverse audience that I want as my readers. So I address black audiences and audiences that are not black as well. I hope that different people reading this book will respond to *something* in it. I'm not always able to predict what one reader or another will comprehend and respond to, but I tried to put lots of different things in there for people to respond to or recognize. So for me the audience is made by the text. (Bedient 664)

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The overabundance of allusions also takes on a different role in the text: that of the performance of Mullen's personal education. By this statement, I do not imply that Mullen is showing off her vast knowledge; instead, I use the term performance to imply a personal reiteration, a personal creation and recreation. Mullen tells Bedient that:

> When you asked "How do you know all this stuff?" it's because I've been searching. We feel incomplete, and we search to make ourselves, our knowledge, more complete. I have been collecting these virtual index cards for a long time. Not wanting to be that person who does not know her own culture and must learn it from the white male authority figure, although I figure that once I get it, it's mine, regardless of how I got it.

> This poem is a performance of that knowledge. It's a very hard-won knowledge that I treasure, because I did not want to be ignorant of my culture. (669)

The education that takes place through the text's allusions is two-fold. Yes, the text allows the reader learn as much as she/he wants to about the references the poem makes; more importantly, however, the text becomes a catch-all for Mullen's knowledge. By writing down her knowledge, Mullen creates it for herself in a more meaningful way. More than just a mnemonic device, the writing of her knowledge becomes for Mullen what I refer to as a practice of her knowledge; the text is a personal performance, a putting to use of all that Mullen has learned. In that sense, it is the writing that makes the knowledge useful for Mullen.

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Monday, February 2, 2004

Looking at Clarence Major's *Juba to Jive: A Dictionary of African-American Slang*, opens up a range of African-American meanings in the text. For example, in the first stanza of the poem,

> Sapphire's lyre styles
> plucked eyebrows
> bow lips and legs
> whose lives are lonely too (*Muse & Drudge* 1)

There are several definitions from *Juba to Jive* that open up the text:

- Sapphire: "derogatory term for a disagreeable woman; in the sixties, an unpopular black female" (396);
- Styles: (noun) "expensive and attractive clothes" (456);
- Styling: (verb) "to show off; strutting; self-parody" (456);
- Plucked: (adj) "a sense of peace or comfort or well-being following sexual intercourse" (357);
- Leg: "a girl or woman; female sexuality" (280).

If I look at the text through the lens of a specifically African-American slang, the first stanza offers more than just a play on Sappho; from the beginning, the subjectivity of black women is a primary concern, through the figure of "Sapphire." There is also the sense of a woman dressing up, as though for a performance (either literal, as suggested by the "lyre," a musical, blues performance, or figurative, the pun on "liar," a woman putting on a costume to pretend she is someone other than who she really is, a Sapphire possibly preparing for a figurative show, such as a date). "Plucked" brings in a sexual reference carried on by the "bow lips and legs."

There are no references in Major's dictionary to any of the words in the fourth line of the opening stanza. Since this line deals with the loneliness of the Sapphire/Sappho woman, a woman who is both artist, musician, sexual being, as well as unpopular, teasing, on the prowl, it is important that there are no slang codes embedded in it, especially after the abundance of slang terms in the previous three lines. Both African-American and non-African-American readers understand the fourth line, not just readers familiar with the slang used before it. In this sense, although the sexuality and sexual body of the Sapphire/Sappho character are what immediately leap out at the reader, it is her loneliness that transgresses all the reading groups' borders. We may miss out on some or all of the previous references, but there is no missing her loneliness.

The pattern of moving from a high concentration of slang to a low concentration (or even an absence) continues in the fourth quatrain, which closes the first page. The phrase "clipped bird" contains several possible slang references; obviously "bird" could be a reference to Charlie Parker, but Major also defines "bird" as "a girl or young woman" (36); clipped is defined as "to steal something, especially to pick one's pocket.… To shoot someone without mortally wounding them" (Major 99). Put together, the hidden allusion refers to a wounded or robbed young woman. Again, Mullen uses a slang reference when describing the woman, but when she moves from describing the woman to describing the woman's feelings, the language contains less slang, which means that more non-African-American readers can relate to it:

> clipped bird eclipsed moon
> soon no memory of you
> no drive or desire survives

you flutter invisible still (*Muse & Drudge* 1)

The allusion to something unnoticed or unappreciated, tossed aside, is rather obvious; the notion that it is a woman that is tossed aside is hidden within slang terms.

I'm suggesting here that the terms Mullen uses to describe women in the text allow a certain openness to female subjectivity, especially black women. Language does not fully contain the women in the text, as many readers will not understand the slang terms used to refer to women or their bodies. Consequently, they remain outside the reification of language, the reification that language can provide for the reader. Women remain somewhat unfixed in the text. Mullen discusses this use of language in her interview with Cynthia Hogue:

> *Muse and Drudge* [sic] is intended to think about folk representations, popular culture representations, self-representations of black women, and to think about how to take what is given. There is a whole set of codes, a whole set of images that we really don't control as individuals. They are collective and they are cultural. The problem as a writer is: how do you write yourself out of the box that you are in? *Muse and Drudge* [sic] is an attempt to take those representations and fracture them, as I try to do with breaking up the lines and collaging the quatrains together, sometimes from four different sources. It was an attempt to use this language as representation, to use it in a self-conscious way as code, as opposed to taking the code as something that is real. The body exists but there is a way that your body is interpreted based on a historical and social context. I take that and use it as material, as opposed to saying well, that defines you; that's what makes you who you are. I have a certain faith as a writer that we can use language in a liberatory way to try to free ourselves. (Hogue)

The invisibility granted to women, since they remain outside the gaze of language, is one of the strongest liberatory aspects of *Muse & Drudge*.

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Wednesday, February 4, 2004

a name determined by other names
prescribed mediation
unblushingly on display
to one man or all (*Muse & Drudge* 2)

There is an emphasis on self-determination in this stanza. A name determined by other names is one defined by an outside source; this limits the name/person, since she/he is unable to take part in the act of definition—and so the definition is a prescribed mediation between the self and the community, where the community holds the power. The self is put on display to one man or all.

The self here is implicitly female, a female body put on display for the male gaze. As with so much of *Muse & Drudge*, the poem aims its emphasis on self-determination directly at the female subject in order to prod the female reader to overcome the reifying effects of allowing men the control to determine female subjectivity.

*****

a name determined by other names
prescribed mediation
unblushingly on display
to one man or all (*Muse & Drudge* 2)

What the text suggests is that the text creates a female community, one where women are able to relate to each other and engage in a self-definition through a mediation with other women. Through a women-only prescribed mediation, women are able to define themselves outside the male gaze. Consequently, the female subject is in control of her body; she puts herself unblushingly on display for men, whether it be one or many, it makes no difference to the empowered woman. Her sexuality is a source of her identity, and, as such, is also a source of her confidence and power. There is a sense in *Muse & Drudge* that women are sexual, powerful beings, and that men should treat them with respect and care; otherwise, there will be consequences.

*****

sun goes on shining

while the debbil beats his wife
blues played lefthanded
topsy-turvy inside out (*Muse & Drudge* 5)

Since *Muse & Drudge* is a blues "played" by a woman, a woman who often complains about the evils of men, it is played backwards, inverted. The normal genders roles are reversed; everything is "topsy-turvy inside out."

Moreover, the text states that the abuse of women portrayed here is played "topsy-turvy"; it condemns abuse towards women as wrong, something backwards. The fact that the sun (son, male) goes on shining as though nothing were happening is also a call to the world to condemn abuse against women.

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sun goes on shining
while the debbil beats his wife
blues played lefthanded
topsy-turvy inside out (*Muse & Drudge* 5)

Major's dictionary offers several key definitions relevant to this stanza:

- "sun's going to shine in my back door some day" : "an expression of hope often voiced by slaves and passed on to later generations" (458);
- "devil is beating his wife" : "in African-American folklore, when the sun appears while it's raining. It was believed that if you stick a pen into the ground and place your ear to it you can hear the blows" (134).

The fact that the sun goes on shining suggests that there is hope even when there is rain (a sun shower, specifically). The stanza refers to a light rainstorm, the sound of which is similar to a lefthanded blues, something similar to a normal rhythm, but not quite regular. This stanza offers an instance of hope, of indomitable belief that better times will always arrive.

*****

One of Mullen's more effective puns is the line "cirrus as a heart attracts" (*Muse & Drudge* 5). The layers here are complex and multiple:

- like a cloud is blown by wind, the heart is moved by unseen, illogical forces.

There is no rhyme or reason to what the heart wants;

- serious as a heart attack, referring to the "bigger than big man" from the line that precedes it. A character study of a man to be reckoned with;
- love is serious as a heart attack;
- what the heart desires is both serious and illogical.

It is impossible for me to choose any one reading; each one resonates, and so the pun keeps the line open, unreifiable. The text feels like it escapes me at the same time it asks me to play along. The puns both engage the reader and repel the reader at the same time.

*****

trouble in mind
naps in the back
if you can't stand
sit in your soul kitsch (*Muse & Drudge* 7)

The punning here is obvious (if you can't stand the heat, stay out of the kitchen), but more important to me is the connotations of the words, as they appear in Major's dictionary:

- naps: kinky hair (315);
- back: "the musical accompaniment given a jazzman doing a solo (14);
- stand tall: "go forth with pride; to be ready for any occasion" (443);
- sit in: "to join any group of people already engaged in some activity such as gambling, playing cards, or checkers; in jazz, when a non-professional or outside musician is invited to join a working group on the stand; during the civil rights movement "sit-in" referred to protests at lunch counters in the South, staged in a dramatic attempt to break down the entrenched walls of segregation in public places…" (418);
- soul: "essentially the essence of blackness" (434);
- kitchen: "nappy hair at the nape of the neck, especially on a woman or girl" (271).

The references in the stanza swirl around hair, jazz playing, the inability to play, and the idea of blackness. One possible reading is that the stanza suggests that the important thing for the African-American woman is to remain true to the African-American community, to find strength and identity there. The community is the kitchen, the room to find solace and familial, communal identity.

However, the kitsch is also important. I think this shows the importance of humour, of the punning language games the text plays over and over again, especially when the times are bad. I find myself unable to pin down what the text says or means. This inability to dominate the text is perhaps the text's "soul kitsch," a place of self-identity, a place that the speaking subject can maintain control over. I would suggest that this control is not absolute, that there is an acknowledgement that outside forces impel decisions in the "soul kitsch," but the ultimate choices are made by the individual.

*****

deja voodoo queens
rain flooded graves in New Orleans
sex model dysfunction
ruint a guest's vacation (*Muse & Drudge* 9)

The intra-stanza logic found here is extremely difficult, and the quotations serves as a reminder that not all the turns and twists take place in the jump from one stanza to the next. Does this stanza refer to sexual voodoo queens, using sex to ruin their guest's vacations? Or does it refer to graves rising from the ground, by means of voodoo, with the zombies walking in a mockery of gender functions? Or does it refer to a young woman's (queen: "a beautiful young woman" [Major 372]) complaint (rain: "to complain, especially about hard times" [Major 375]) about menstruation (flooding: "menstruation" [Major 177]), menstruation as the female body's dysfunction? If the reader chooses the latter, is the comparison made between menstruation and the feeling of being high or hurt, like someone in jail (ruint: "to be extremely intoxicated from narcotics; ugly; hurt, as in an accident or fight" [Major 392]; vacation: "time spent in jail or prison" [Major 495])?

Or do I do the text a disservice by trying to untie all its knots? Mullen has stated that she doesn't expect the reader to get all of the allusions, or to understand all of the stanzas.[36] Perhaps we are meant to just sit back and enjoy the sound of the words, to listen to the text as though it were a jazz performance, and just enjoy the music?

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Friday, February 6, 2004

One strategy in the text privileges the individual over the community, presenting subjectivity as something that comes from inside the person:

my skin but not my kin
my race but not my taste
my state and not my fate
my country not my kunk (*Muse & Drudge* 10)

The individual, then, is more than just a singular representation of the group's ideology. At one and the same time, the text acknowledges the individual's inclusion in the group, but also shows that there is an essential individual identity that remains outside the group's influences. This idea impacts not only individual subjectivity, but the group's subjectivity as well. As Mullen states in her interview with Bedient, "A people is many individuals" (653), not a monolithic, reified construction. The poem privileges neither nature nor nurture in the formation of either the individual or the community.

*****

chained thus together
voice held me hostage
divided our separate ways
with a knife against my throat

black dream you came
sleep chilled stuttering spirit
drunk on apple ripple
still in my dark unmarked grave (*Muse & Drudge* 13)

These stanzas suggest a connection in Mullen's text with slavery and slave narratives, and the formation of African-American identity that came out of and despite of those practices. But how do we read this? Did the speaker divide the ways with a knife? did a (presumably white) dominant, threatening presence? did the voice do it? We are unable to locate the active subject in the first stanza, which renders the action somewhat unknowable to the reader; all we can know for sure is that there is an act of violence that creates a separation.

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[36] See Bedient, page 656: "I know they [allusions] won't be detected by many readers. Some readers will get some, and other readers will get others, and that's fine; that's as it probably should be."

The second stanza focuses on the remnants of slavery in the African-American community today. The dream/nightmare of slavery returns to the speaker, which imaginatively transports him/her to a slave's grave. The result is an inability to live with the memory of slavery, suggesting a traumatic inability to remember the incident; this inability to deal with the past trauma forces the speaker into a waking death, in which s/he lies conscious in an unmarked grave, owned by the past and therefore unable to own the present.

*****

The importance of writing to the creation of subjectivity, especially female subjectivity, is a recurring theme in Mullen's poem. For example, there is this powerful stanza:

> write on the vagina
> of virgin lamb paper
> mother times mirror
> divided by daughter (14)

Here, the text links the act of writing with the ownership of the female body, the woman's body becomes the speaker's text—literally, as the words are metaphorically written on the vagina. The quotation also stresses the importance of the interplay between individual and community, in this case a matrilineal heritage. The daughter is a product of the mother, reflected but lessened (divided/made younger in age) in the image portrayed in the mirror. Subjectivity exists in the mediation of the individual's writing and the body that both creates and holds that writing; metaphorically, the speaker writes her history/voice/ideology onto her body, which is a site of connection with the matrilineal heritage, since the body is a physical creation of the mother's body.

*****

devils dancing on a dime
cut a rug in ragtime
jitterbug squat diddly bow
stark strangled banjo (*Muse & Drudge* 18)

Some definitions from Major's dictionary:

- devil: "white man… especially white police" (134);
- dance on [one's] lips [face]: "to strike one in the face" (129);
- dime: "a ten-dollar bill; ten-year prison term" (136);
- diddly: "the Christian hell; distance; something of little or no value" (135);
- banjo: "a stringed musical instrument (banjar) captured Africans brought from West Africa to the so-called New World" (21).

I draw connections in the first two lines of the stanza between white cultural power/ institutions and their attempts to deny minority groups equal power. The last two lines imply that foundational popular American music, dance, and even instruments are African-American cultural elements, which leads to the punning inversion of the American flag becoming more truly a "stark strangled banjo," an image of African-American culture violently silenced, as opposed to the "star-spangled banner" white America promotes as the accurate image of America.

*****

In addition to the connection made in the text between writing and ownership of the female body, there is the element of sexual pleasure. To refer to the woman's body as *her* instrument, her instrument to play, implies pleasure in sex and, specifically, masturbation:

on her own jive
player and instrument
all the way live
the way a woman might use it (*Muse & Drudge* 22)

This theme of masturbation further stresses the self-creation of female subjectivity, since masturbation is usually a solitary practice. The implications are that women do not need men for sexual satisfaction, that a woman can use her own instrument with her own jive.

*****

The importance of reading and writing is a dominant theme in *Muse & Drudge* (a theme which goes back to the earliest African-American texts, the slave narratives). Take, for example, these three stanzas:

signs in the heavens
graphemes leave the trees
turning flesh pages
of notation: a choreography for bees

cooter got her back scratched
with spirit scribble
sent down under water
with some letters for the ancestors

the folks shuffle off
this mortal coffle and
bamboula back to
the motherland (*Muse & Drudge* 31)

The importance of being able to read the signs is connected to the black body, a body which is a grapheme in the trees—a reference, I would suggest, to the lynching of black people in America. The notion of writing moves from a death image to an image of life, as the cooter ("turtle" [Major 113]) carries letters to the ancestors, to the past. There has already been a connection between turtles and women in the text: "that snapping turtle pussy" (4); consequently, the cooter is an image of the writing female, writing messages to the past.

The importance of the ability to read and write is then shown in the third stanza, which inverts and manipulates Shakespeare, the ultimate canonical white male literary figure, in such a fashion as to make him relevant to African-American culture. Mullen inserts the coffle into Hamlet's great soliloquy, subverting the belief often held by slave advocates that slaves lacked humanity. At one and the same time, the text claims universal humanity for African-Americans and dislodges the white liberal blindness to minority cultures, where white people assume their culture equals world culture. The fact that all this is made possible through an expertise with words reaffirms the subjectivity found in the ability to read and write (an ability which, it should be remembered, was officially illegal to teach to slaves for a large period in America).

*****

Monday, February 9, 2004

Page 34 of *Muse & Drudge* is one of the rare instances where the page seems to function overtly as the poetic field. The four stanzas work together in a rather obvious way, since they share obvious points of relation:

if your complexion is a mess
our elixir spells skin success
you'll have appeal bewitch be adored
hechizando con crema dermoblanqueadora

what we sell is enlightenment
nothing less than beauty itself
since when can be seen in the dark
what shines hidden in dirt

double dutch darky
take kisses back to Africa
they dipped you in a vat
at the wacky chocolate factory

color we've got in spades
melanin gives perpetual shade
though rhythm's no answer to cancer
pancakes pale and butter can get rancid

Here, the text reveals the advertising industry as a tool that whitewashes American culture, particularly non-white minorities. The first two stanzas equate whiteness with cleanliness and attractiveness while implicitly equating non-whiteness with dirt and ugliness, faults that purchasing products will correct. These ideas create a vicious circle, as advertising creates an unfulfillable lack in non-white people—the desire to be white/right. Literally and figuratively, advertising whitewashes culture in the US (and Canada). Whiteness is set up as the norm, as the natural, uncoloured, unracialized state. The text picks up this notion in a humourous fashion in the third stanza, with the dipping; again, whiteness is the natural state, as whiteness is the supposedly complete absence of colour.

In the fourth stanza, Mullen inverts the hierarchy established/revealed in the earlier stanzas. In particular, this stanza champions the presence of colour as a desirable quality, through the implied desire of whites to tan their skin darker. Mullen uses scientific terminology, the presence of higher amounts of melanin, as the explanation for darker skin. In a subtle move, Mullen has inverted not only the white-positive/dark-negative hierarchy; she also uses scientific discourse to explain dark skin, which, in relation to the absurd ideas espoused by the implicitly white speaker of the third stanza, inverts the inherited racist hierarchy that promotes whites as rational/human and blacks as emotional/animal. Finally, the text reaffirms blackness as the healthier human state, through the allusion to higher rates of skin cancer in white Americans than in black Americans; white butter can get rancid.

The fact that these stanzas work together in this fashion serves to emphasize the ideas here; I would argue that it is much more difficult to miss the stanzas' implications because the page works as a unified poetic field, which brings attention to the points running through and connecting the stanzas.

*****

The presence of the consumerist culture that both drives and is driven by the advertising ideology appears elsewhere in *Muse & Drudge*, such as in the following stanza:

dry bones in the valley
turn over with wonder

was it to die for our piece
of buy 'n' buy pie chart (*Muse & Drudge* 37)

Unlike the earlier instance on page 34, there is nothing overtly racialized about this discussion of the unfulfillable lack in the individual created by advertising. It is possible to view the "our" as a reference to African-Americans, but I don't think it is necessarily so. If this "our" does indeed refer to an inclusive American populace, then the text implies that all Americans are in the same situation: struggling futilely to achieve the unachievable. I don't believe, then, that the book suggests that white America exists in some ideal world outside advertising's power; though advertising works to whitewash the multitudes, Mullen doesn't suggest that that means that white Americans are somehow exempt from advertising's control on the cultural psyche. In a way, then, this stanza suggests that white America is just as much a product of the advertising culture as are minority groups in America; whiteness is a set of learned qualities/beliefs/actions, and not an essential, natural state (even for whites).

Although it doesn't overtly deal with the subject, I believe that this stanza, placed in context, suggests that Mullen privileges nurture over nature as far as the creation of subjectivity is concerned.

*****

The connection Mullen draws between language and sexuality works to emphasize the power of language on the individual. At times, there is an almost physical connection between language and sexual satisfaction in the text:

your only tongue turns
me loose excuse my French
native speaker's opening act
a tight clench in the dark theatre (*Muse & Drudge* 41)

Language opens up the speaker's body, as cunnilingus becomes the site where language physically impacts the female body, as though the tongue is speaking pleasure into her genitalia's "dark theatre." Language creates the desire in the woman, implied by the pun on "loose," suggesting both sexual freedom and also sexual licentiousness.

This idea of language leading to licentiousness could function as an apologia for the entirety of *Muse & Drudge*, as though the speaker(s) of the text are so aroused by language that they can't help themselves. The text of the poem becomes both the proof of language's arousal, and the product of it; metaphorically, at least, the poem is the inevitable child of a person's love of (and with) language.

Is this connection between language and unbridled desire unwittingly supportive of certain stereotypical views of African-Americans? Does the text support the worn-out tropes of the unquenchable sexual appetites of African-Americans, a belief that helped support the denigration of slaves as being sub-human animals? Or is the text attempting to allow a recognition of personal desire, arguing that it is okay for black people to admit sexual desire, that it is a natural, *human* quality, in much the same way that the text argues for the normalization of female sexual desire?

*****

Page 46 also functions as a poetic field. Interestingly, this page also deals with explicitly African-American concerns, in this case the legacy of slavery to the current African-American community:

up from slobbery
hip hyperbole
the soles of black feet
beat down back streets

a Yankee porkchop
for your knife and fork
your fill of freedom
in Philmeyork

never trouble rupture
urban space fluctuates
gentrify the infrastructure
feel up vacant spaces

no moors steady whores
studs warn no mares
blurred rubble slew of vowels
stutter war no more (*Muse & Drudge* 46)

Here, there is an implied chronological progression, from the early post-civil war period (the first stanza), through to the current state of African-American communities. The rise up from slavery is discounted as a hip hyperbole, a convenient overstatement that the rest of the page works to deny. The promises offered in the second stanza are refuted by the final two stanzas; instead of freedom and abundant food, the legacy of emancipation is ghetto life and rampant prostitution—and even this life is threatened, by the process of gentrification, which means once again displacing black communities in America. Finally, the text claims the great promise of emancipation and equality to be nothing more than a "blurred rubble slew of vowels." The last line implies that the race war that has lingered since before emancipation is now over, but not because things have improved; instead, the end of the war has come because the black community has sued for peace, stuttering no more war. Instead of equality, the result has been that the black community has been all but destroyed economically.

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The language play in which Mullen engages reaffirms her command of language, which also reaffirms her subjectivity as a thinking, rational human being. However, the text also suggests that there is a strength in denying language:

mutter patter simper blubber
murmur prattle smatter blather
mumble chatter whisper bubble
mumbo-jumbo palaver gibber blunder (*Muse & Drudge* 57)

These terms, which imply an inability to speak properly or loudly, present a denial of communication. However, there is the "mumbo-jumbo palaver" that sneaks into the list. "Mumbo-jumbo" is a common term for nonsense; however, Major's dictionary states that one slang meaning of longstanding is "a play; trick," and that the term "derived from *Mama Dyumbo*…, a protective spirit of the Khassonkee tribe of Senegal" (313).

What this suggests is that the refusal to communicate properly can allow for moments of resistance. Much like the slave songs, where hidden meanings were sung directly in front of unsuspecting whites, there is the possibility of retaining personal, hidden communication within a select group, so long as that group knows the codes. To the outsider, this will seem like nonsense, but to the initiates, it will be mumbo jumbo.

Two of Mullen's audiences intersect in this stanza. The text holds a message for the African-American community, but I think there is also a message to the members of the poetic avant-garde. The poem refers to both communities, through Mullen's use of hidden code, as discrete groups. Outside these groups, the poem may seem like nonsense; however, to both groups, Mullen gives a knowing wink, an inclusive "we know better" than to think the text has nothing to say.

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Wednesday, February 11, 2004

The text contains a link between word play and sexual fecundity, as though the ability to create through language carries with it a requisite sexual power. One of the most fertile stanzas in the text openly illustrates this connection:

> pregnant pause conceived
> by doorknob insinuation
> and onset animal
> laminates no DNA (*Muse & Drudge* 60)

The speaker is pregnant in body, but also in language, through the pregnant pause that an ability to manipulate speech creates. But even more so, the final two lines of the stanza provide an example of sexual and linguistic prowess in action. An animal that does not laminate its DNA suggests an inability or unwillingness "to separate or split into layers or leaves" (*Oxford English Dictionary*); I interpret this as an animal whose genetic nature is too powerful to be diminished in the act of sex, the act of transmitting its DNA. The form revels in its own ability: the two lines are an intricate palindrome. The text displays its potent ability to manipulate, create, and recreate language. In this sense, the text refuses to laminate its own DNA by refusing to merely use inherited linguistic forms; linguistic creation, linguistic procreation, is unabated in the text.

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Sex and sexuality also appear in *Muse & Drudge* as one of the text's major trace elements. Even in a stanza where the word never appears, sex is sometimes rife:

> a strict sect's
> hystereotypist hypercorrects
> the next vexed hex
> erects its noppy text (62)

In the case of this stanza, both the punning reference to sex ("sect's"), as well as the word "erects" bring in sexuality. Moreover, the use of consonance, the relatively rarely used "ex" sound, throughout the stanza echoes and reminds the reader of the sex mentioned earlier. As a result, the entire stanza appears to be about sex, even though the word doesn't actually appear, and the content is not ostensibly about sex.

Furthermore, this trace sexuality reaffirms the connection between text and sexuality, a connection which is a more explicit trace that runs throughout the poem.

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The text presents the *eros* drive, found in the poem through its overt and covert references to sex, but also in its insistent word play and creativity with language, as a positive contrast to the *thanatos* drive found in other creative endeavours:

> rap attacks your tick
> cold fusion's licks
> could make you sick
> nobody's dying in this music (63)

The poem rebukes both the arts (rap music) and the sciences (nuclear fusion) for their connection with death, either by glamourizing it (hip hop) or by actively bringing it about (nuclear warheads). Since *Muse & Drudge* is so concerned with creativity as a positive force, as a force that exists in both the ecstatic and the mundane elements of life (as suggested by the title), I think the attack on the arts and sciences this stanza offers comes from a belief that eros is the true, pure creative drive, and that to mix creativity with thanatos is a betrayal of all that the arts and the sciences should be working towards. In this sense, I do see a utopic element in the poem, since the text argues for an endlessly creative, fruitful relationship between the reader and language, and, using language as a site of mediation, between the reader and the physical world.

Consequently, when the text goes on, just two stanzas after the one quoted immediately above, to say that death is a part of the poem,

did I say nobody's dying
well I lied, like last night
I was lying with your mama who was crying
for all the babies born in Alabama (63)

I think the idea is not that there is an element of thanatos in the poem, but that the text carries with it a recognition that the utopic zone is possible only within language. This stanza recognizes that death and destruction are an inevitable part of human existence in the world. However, the poem manages to incorporate even these painful moments within itself, thereby converting these moments of destruction into part of the eros drive; the utopic zone in language, then, is able to incorporate destruction as a positive element, as part of the eros drive, as opposed to the thanatos drive to which destruction is tied in the physical world.

This connection between destruction and the eros drive is possibly most explicit in one of Mullen's best stanzas:

fast dance synched up so
coal burning tongues
united surviving ruin
last chance apocalypso (65)

Here, the text incorporates the ultimate destruction, the apocalypse, into the eros drive through the text's creative principle of punning. Destruction changes from thanatos into being part of eros, part of the erotic drive of life; this change transforms the apocalypse into a song, and so it becomes just another element in Mullen's ecstatic, utopic wordplay. There is a belief here that eros, represented by dance, a fast, ecstatic dance, is stronger than thanatos.

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Maybe the most important trace in the poem is that of its title. Here is a list of puns and references to *Muse & Drudge* in the text:

muted amused mulish (14)

***

muse of the world picks
out stark melodies
her raspy fabric
tickling the ebonies (17)

***

mule for hire or worse
beast of burden down when I lay
clean and repair the universe
lawdy lawdy hallelujah when I lay

tragic yellow mattress
belatedly beladied blues
shines staggerdly avid diva
ruses of the lunatic muse (21)

***

men harnessed mules
rode hard put away wet
on the brine sea
unwed men toss and sweat (25)

***

spin the mix fast forward
mutant taint of blood
mongrel cyborg
mute and dubbed (42)

***

dark work and hard
though any mule can

knock down the barn
what we do best requires finesse (49)

***

precious cargo up crooked alleys
mules and drugs
blood on the lilies
of the fields (74)

These traces remind the reader of the double nature of the text's ecstatic and dull nature. They also signify the text's ability to laugh at itself. I think the puns on the title signal a desire to keep the text fresh and lively, as opposed to the process of deadening that usually goes hand in hand with a piece of serious literature.

There is also a certain amount of camaraderie created by these puns and allusions. The text acknowledges the attentive reader who is able to make out these puns as an initiate in a secret club. Considering that the puns are on the title of the text, the poem overtly names and re-names itself, and so the text explicitly brings the reader into the realm of the text's own creation. The poem becomes as much the reader's text as it is Mullen's in that the attentive reader deconstructs and reconstructs the poem through its puns.

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Friday, February 13, 2004

Juliana Spahr, in her article "'What Stray Companion': Harryette Mullen's Communities of Reading," draws a direct connection between the form of *Muse & Drudge* and the subjectivity that the poem proposes; Spahr states that "As Mullen's work illustrates, the difficult and necessary work of challenging limiting subjectivities requires also that one challenge the strictures of grammar and rigorous narrative" (92). The lack of linear narrative, as well as the lack of grammatical structures, opens up the possibility of new subjectivities, as opposed to a rather reified subjectivity. Consequently, *how* things are spoken in the text are at least as important, if not more important than *what* things are spoken. In particular, the nearly complete lack of punctuation in the text is extremely important. With the exception of one question mark towards the end of the poem (77), there is no end punctuation in the entire poem. This opens several possibilities for the speaker(s):

- the entire poem is one long, uninterrupted sentence, a verbal explosion unleashed;
- each stanza is spoken by a different subject (because there is no end punctuation, it is possible that the reader will not make any connections between stanzas; the lack of end punctuation means that there is no grammatical imperative combining the stanzas or maintaining the same subject between stanzas);
- each stanza is overheard and dictated by one subject.

Since there are no levels of narration that exist outside the poem (no frames, no moments where the narrative "I"s exist separately from the act of speaking the poem) anyone of these three alternatives is possible (or, perhaps, the poem is a mixture of the three). But the point is, the reader can't decide authoritatively which speaking position is "correct." This leaves the speaking subject unknowable, or at least untotalizable in the reader's mind; the speaker remains unreified.

Spahr also comments on the important role language plays in subjectivity. She states that

> Talking differently, with its emphasis on resistance and communal acts of language…, moves away from the moments when language defines what an individual is (the way the subject of the sentence and subjectivity slip into hierarchies of domination in language) and toward the way language can define a collective yet multivalent identity. I read Mullen's intent here as proposing alternative literacies, alternative reading practices. These ways of reading, with their emphasis on language's slippages, are not pursuing correctness or standards. Instead, they are aligned with the impudence of flexibility of talk, orality, and resistances. (104)

This flexibility of language, which renders the text's speaker untotalizable in the reader's mind, also works to free the reader's own subjectivity. There is an awareness offered by *Muse & Drudge* that since language defines subjectivity and language can, indeed, be manipulated and set expanded beyond the boundaries society places on it, so can the reader's subjectivity.

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Spahr offers a valuable insight into *Muse & Drudge*'s practice of allusion. Specifically, Spahr locates the practice within the African-American tradition, aligning Mullen's allusive play with the musical practice of sampling:

> Further emphasizing the unfaithful and unowned practices of reading is Mullen's use of sampling.... The theft is deliberately self-aware and allusive. At times it functions in the song as ironic critique, but often it is used in homage, as an acknowledgement of influence or of the power of someone else's work. Either way, it points to how meaning is tied to community and is necessarily collective.... In rap, the sample points to collective cultures, group identities, and community reading practices. Mullen's use of sampling works similarly. When... Mullen samples Sappho and overlays Bessie Smith, the sample functions as a reference with an emphasis on recontextualization that rewrites history. I call Mullen's use here 'sampling' because it differs from modernism's intertextuality, which tends to function as a sort of tale of the tribe that often reinforces dominant canonical groups. But while Mullen's move here is highly literate, her work charts different sorts of cultural literacy and suggests alternative canons with its emphasis on oral traditions, contemporary oral forms like advertising jingles, popular culture, and high modernism. The allusions of her work function more as preservative of often overlooked works and traditions. (103)

More than just renaming the practice, the notion of sampling works to create an African-American writerly tradition; Mullen's practice does more than just update or borrow a literary device from white Modernism. The African-American practice of sampling has learned from Modernism's allusive technique, but it goes beyond it; it incorporates Modernist allusivity within an inclusive network that brings high and low culture together. Sampling, in other words, belongs to the Postmodern world, implying that African-American artists are contemporary or up to date with artists of other ethnicities.

Elisabeth A. Frost offers a similar insight into *Muse & Drudge* by dealing with the text's verbal play within the African-American tradition of "signifying," a term defined by Henry Louis Gates:

> 'Signifying,' Gates says, is the playing of various kinds of rhetorical games in black vernacular, and it can mean 'to talk with great innuendo, to camp, cajole, needle, and lie' as well as 'to talk around a subject, never quite coming to the point' (Gates 54). Signifying contrasts with the 'supposed transparency of normal speech'; it 'turns upon the free play of language itself, upon the displacement of meanings' (53). There is a political and not just a formal 'play' here that applies to *Trimmings*: signifying involves 'a process of semantic appropriation'; 'words are decolonised,' given a new orientation that reflects a rejection of politics as usual. According to Gates, this double-voicedness is associative, and it employs puns and figurative substitutions to create an indeterminacy of interpretation (49, 22). (Frost 14)

Once again, the critic firmly places Mullen's work within an African-American tradition. *Muse & Drudge* is not just a white avant-garde piece, but a continuation of black devices, skills, and practices.

This emphasis on defining Mullen's work as a continuation of African-American traditions takes on a greater importance in light of what Mullen herself has had to say about the relationship between "black" writing, avant-garde writing, and her uncomfortable position existing between these two camps, as opposed to within both camps. Mullen has made several comments that echo her remarks in her article "Poetry and Identity":

> Evidently, publishers of African-American anthologies are entirely uninterested in my more recent work, from *Trimmings* on. Only in the earlier poetry, represented by the work in *Tree Tall Woman*, or similarly 'speakerly' poems, am I digestible as a black poet. My two prose poem

> books, *Trimmings…* and *S*PERM**K*T…*, apparently, go overlooked by those seeking to incorporate me into an African American poetic tradition, just as those who praise the prose poems generally do not connect them to the emphatically ethnic poetic 'voice' of *Tree Tall Woman*, which seems markedly inflected by race, class, gender, culture, and region, compared to the more ambiguously located subjectivity of *Trimmings* and *S*PERM**K*T.* (86-7)

Critics such as Spahr and Frost seem to be breaking down the boundaries that Mullen complains about between African-American writing and innovative writing. Both critics claim particular innovative aspects of *Muse & Drudge* as African-American practices. The importance of this claiming goes far beyond categorizing one poem; the acknowledgement of innovative practices as African-American practices works to open up the field of possible writing and reading subjectivities available to black Americans. It is a refusal to allow critics or social or ethnic groups to define African-Americans along narrow, confining ideas, as a people who *only* write/think/act in "this" particular way. For these reasons, *Muse & Drudge*'s obvious affinity to black music takes on a hidden political stance. Mullen draws out these political aspects in her interview with Farah Griffin and Michael Magee; she states that

> there are references to that [African-American music] in *Muse and Drudge* [sic], you know, like the 'occult iconic crow' going 'way out / on the other side of far' (40), and I'm thinking of someone like a Thelonius Monk, you know, who could just be *out*, and people just said, 'Well, that's where he is'…. I think the musicians are maybe just given more leeway than the writers are because the writers… I mean, people have this notion that the writers are supposed to talk to them in their language…. (48)

Mullen reveres music and musicality for the ability to communicate outside the traditional language patterns that people use in day-to-day speech. *Muse & Drudge* uses its own musicality, as well as the multiple references to music throughout, to justify its own style of non-linear, non-logical communicative practices.

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The overdetermined nature of the allusions in *Muse & Drudge* has particular ramifications on reading strategies for the poem. Specifically, the allusions frustrate the attempts the reader might have to exhaust all possible references. For example, Juliana Spahr lists a long series of possible allusions for the "peaches" Mullen refers to on page 1 of *Muse & Drudge*, and then states

> I… doubt anyone could unpack it exhaustively. Part of the point is the impossible unpacking. Mullen's work in this book challenges the claims of hermetic competence that highly intertextual works and their readers often encourage or espouse. While this work allows readers to do the unpacking…, it is always a provisional unpacking because the markers are so loaded with culture that one cannot come up with an easily exhaustive answer. This work urges that readers abandon that feeling of cleverness, of being well trained, of successfully penetrating a work to an exhaustiveness, and instead recognize reading as connective. (113)

Mullen's poem calls for a new reading practice, one that will learn to adapt to the writing practice that she offers. In this sense, my critical practice is an attempt to change academic discussions on texts such as *Muse & Drudge*, since I intend to suggest through the form of my examination that the critical will to master texts must be tossed aside in favour of more fractured, inclusive, and diverse critical responses.

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Monday, February 16, 2004

Jean-François Lyotard has stated that "A work can become modern only if it is first postmodern. Postmodernism thus understood is not modernism at its end but in the nascent state, and this state is constant" ("Answering" 44). Lyotard, obviously, defines modernism and postmodernism according to non-chronological qualities that the movements share; they are omnipresent movements within the arts, not terms for actual literary or artistic movements.

There is in Lyotard a certain fatalism when it comes to innovative texts: the innovative, challenging postmodern text will inevitably become the conventional modernist text.[37] This recuperation is inevitable because the postmodern text creates the forms by which it must be understood, which means that there is a lag or gap between the creation of the textual postmodern form and the reader's understanding and ability to incorporate that form. Readers/viewers/audiences will inevitably overcome this understanding gap, as they become accustomed to the forms that once shocked and confused them. Presumably, the only text that could remain postmodern, in Lyotard's schema, is a text that is unread; however, since the author must have some sort of understanding of the text she or he has just created, if I take Lyotard's ideas to their extreme, then the postmodern author becomes the first agent of recuperation for his or her own postmodern text, since the author implicitly has an understanding of the text she or he has written. The only text that can avoid this movement from postmodern challenge to modernist canon is the unwritten, unrealized text.

Moving this discussion to *Muse & Drudge* leaves us with several possibilities. Perhaps Mullen's text is an example of Lyotard's postmodern, a text that is creating the rules by which it will eventually be judged and understood. In this sense, Mullen's denial of linearity, narrative, and traditional language games is not so much a breach of these language games as a volley in an attempt to master them; the break into unknown territory is an attempt to colonize that territory. This line of thought supports the notion that the innovative text is unwittingly driving forward the culture it attempts to dismantle.[38]

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[37] In "Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?" Lyotard states that

> modern aesthetics is an aesthetics of the sublime, though a nostalgic one. It allows the unpresentable to be put forward only as the missing contents; but the form, because of its recognizable consistency, continues to offer the reader or viewer matter for solace and pleasure. Yet these sentiments do not constitute the real sublime sentiment, which is in an intrinsic combination of pleasure and pain: the pleasure that reason should exceed all presentation, the pain that imagination or sensibility should not be equal to the concept.
>
> The postmodern would be that which, in the modern, puts forward the unpresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable; that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unpresentable. A postmodern artist or writer is in the position of a philosopher: the text he writes, the work he produces are not in principle governed by preestablished rules, and they cannot be judged according to a determining judgment, by applying familiar categories to the text or to the work. Those rules and categories are what the work of art itself is looking for. The artist and the writer, then, are working without rules in order to formulate the rules of what *will have been done*. Hence the fact work and text have the character of an *event*; hence, also, they always come too late for their author, or, what amounts to the same thing, their being put into work, their realization… always begin too soon. Postmodern would have to be understood according to the paradox of the future[*post*] anterior [*modo*]. (46)

Perhaps Mullen's text offers a way around Lyotard's closed circle, which inevitably recuperated every innovative text. Perhaps the fact that Mullen's text remains unrememberable, that the reader forgets so many of the stanzas as s/he moves through the text, the fact that there is no real textual accumulation in the reader's mind, perhaps this is the way to break out of Lyotard's cycle of inevitable recuperation? Perhaps, much like a hypertext, Mullen's poem is too slippery for the reader to ever grasp?

The answer will reveal itself in the future, I think. It is also likely that the future readers of Mullen's poem will, as Lyotard's schema suggests, no longer find *Muse & Drudge* to be a radically unknowable or disrememberable text. Until that possible future arrives, the poem offers hope that a text can do more than act as one of Paul Mann's "avant-colonies."

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[38] See, for example, Paul Mann's argument in *The Theory-Death of the Avant-Garde* for a strong example of the belief that the avant-garde's innovative challenges merely drive forward culture:

> The end of the avant-garde is the reorganization of cultural space. The culture industry uses its vanguard to remap the foreign as a margin, a site comprehensible only in relation to itself. Elsewhere becomes colony, an arena of overproduction and underdevelopment for an imperial appetite that can assimilate and reproduce nearly every sort of exotica. In exchange the avant-colony is compensated with a discourse of radical difference, moral superiority, and an occasional government grant. In the end this process is so blatant that it becomes difficult even to speak of exogenous zones: the last colonial resource expropriated by the market is the idea of the foreign itself. (79)

Chapter Three

Not Understanding, But Undergoing:

John Cage's "Writing for the Second Time through *Finnegans Wake*"

Tuesday, April 13, 2004[39]

In "John Cage's Queer Silence; or, How to Avoid Making Matters Worse," Jonathan D. Katz draws a direct link between the use of silence in Cage's work and Cage's politics. According to Katz, "What silence offered [Cage] was the prospect of resisting the status quo without opposing it" (55); silence was a political stance that both underpinned and was derived from Cage's belief in non-confrontational politics. Silence is an important element, then, in what David W. Bernstein refers to as Cage's commitment to alternative culture. For Katz, there were also two specific (yet interrelated), personal reasons for Cage's silence: his homosexuality and his belief in Zen.

Cage's initial reason for adopting silence, according to Katz, was his homosexuality. Although he maintained a long-time homosexual partnership with Merce Cunningham (Katz cites their attraction as the reason for the failure of Cage's marriage), Cage rarely and only later in life openly admitted his homosexuality in any public forum; Katz states that

> The most significant historical account of Cage's gay life, based on two remarkably candid interviews with him, is Thomas Hines, "Then Not Yet 'Cage': The Los Angeles Years, 1912-1938," in *John Cage: Composed in America*.... By contrast, as late as 1988 an *Architectural Digest* spread on Cage and Cunningham showed them in a photograph together in the apartment they shared but referred to them only as "life-long friends...." (41-2).

Katz puts forward a number of reasons for Cage's silence on this issue:

- there was an inability to express his personal emotions. Katz points towards

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[39] The entries in this chapter were arranged according to chance methods. Once the chapter was complete, the dates of the entries were written down on separate pieces of paper and placed in a jar; the order in which the dates were pulled from the jar determined the order of the entries.

Cage's musical piece *Perilous Nights*, which dates from the period of the dissolution of Cage's marriage and the beginning of his relationship with Cunningham as an example of Cage's work where he is unable to express himself: "In *Perilous Nights* [Cage] seems, paradoxically to have discovered the impossibility of communication only while working to express some very specific, highly charged emotions, and his subsequent abandonment of an expressive musicality was thus immediately interwoven with the changes in his personal life that followed the state of his relationship with Cunningham" (44). This inability to express himself was the first stage of Cage's silence, as he soon made a conscious decision not to attempt to express himself in his work.

- Cage's discovery of Zen prompted a new acceptance of silence by redefining silence as a place of personal safety and healing for a gay man: "Zen repositioned the closet, not as a source of repression or anxiety, but as a means to achieve healing; it was in not talking about—and hence not reifying—one's troubles that healing began" (45).
- silence allowed Cage to move from a personal, egocentric stance in his work to a communal stance, since non-expression and removal of the artist's personal desires opened up his work to the audience's own experiences. This, in turn, allowed for an implied element of social commentary in the work: "Paradoxically, at least from a Western perspective, not talking about feelings would yield a society free of the invidious excesses of emotion enacted on the social plane: hatred, and oppression. Through Zen, Cage could connect his involuntary, highly individuated experience of the closet with a larger social-ethical politics of monadic non-interference" (46).
- silence allowed Cage to develop his interest in political anarchy in his work without becoming overtly didactic; the absence of direct political commentary in his work does not, then, mean that there is an absence of political opinion in his work. Specifically, silence allowed Cage to avoid explicitly stating, and thus reifying, his personal beliefs: "Hence freedom from meaning was also freedom from domination, definition, and control in a very real-world sense. After all, to

> be a subordinated subject is to be defined by power. To articulate the social body, and one's place or investment in it, was thus to divide that body against itself. In silence, there was instead a wholeness, a process of healing" (52).

The benefits of silence were multiple: it allowed Cage, as a gay man, to have a public voice in an era when homosexuals were not allowed voices; it allowed Cage to express his belief in anarchy and Zen, without requiring him to define—and consequently reify—what his beliefs exactly were; it allowed him to offer alternatives to the status quo without being confrontational.

This last point is particularly important. Cage believed that confrontational (or oppositional) politics were doomed to fail, since every oppositional position necessarily maintains a connection with what it wants to change. Katz explains this in terms of the binary thinking oppositional politics promotes:

> Some recent poststructuralist analyses of both textual and cultural oppositionality stress the utility of opposition as a means of control. In these accounts, opposition may simply reproduce the binary logic through which domination writes itself, and so the oppositional becomes the outside that allows the inside to cohere in a series of exclusions. Given its instrumentality to oppression, then, opposition continually risks co-optation as a mere tool of hegemony; indeed, as we have seen, the outsider (e.g., the Communist or, for that matter, the homosexual) has long supported, if not actually authorized, the production of the power that controls him or her. Once marked as oppositional, any disturbance can be incorporated into a discourse of oppositionality that only catalyzes oppressive constructions, just as homosexuality supported heterosexuality and Communism stabilized the cold war consensus. (58-9)

Consequently, Cage's silence is an attempt to move beyond such binaries, in order to expand the field of play, so to speak.[40]

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[40] Along these lines, Cage's ideas are remarkably similar to those of such diverse theorists of postmodernity as Jean-François Lyotard and Jean Baudrillard.

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What is the relationship between silence, which is possible to incorporate into musical works, and literary texts, which function on the absence of silence, on the production of words/sounds? In Cage's case, at least, they have almost everything in common. In particular, they intersect around the notion of meaning.

Cage constantly denied the existence of silence (for example, there is Cage's famous anecdote about him standing inside an anechoic chamber, supposedly in absolute silence, and hearing the whistling of his own nervous system); likewise, if we take a silent piece of music, like *4'33"*, the point is that there is no silence once attentive listening occurs (the audience members as well as the surrounding environment will produce a range of sounds during the piece's performance). In some senses, then, the idea of silence is already a metaphor for something left unsaid or unintended. This is the connection to a text like "Writing for the Second Time through *Finnegans Wake*": although there are many sounds and words, even phrases, that are produced within/by the text, nothing is truly said. It is a text of noise, not of communication (in terms of communication theory). As far as meaning goes, a text that is all noise is basically nonsense, or non-communicative—and therefore silent, metaphorically speaking, in the same way that Cage's musical texts are silent.

As a result, "Writing..." performs in the same silent way as most of Cage's other mature works: it is non-confrontational, exemplary,[41] non-hierarchical, anarchic, and interpenetrating and unimpeded. It is, in this sense, an ideal text; it offers alternatives (alternative meanings, alternative readings, alternative aspects of creativity, etc.) without engaging in binary oppositions. Like all silent texts, it is, in a sense, a limitless text, since the possibilities for meanings are, realistically speaking, inexhaustible.

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Friday, May 7, 2004

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[41] By "exemplary" I do not mean perfect, as some dictionaries define the word; instead, I mean that Cage intended works such as "Writing..." to show the reader a better way of living in the world. In this sense, a silent text such as "Writing..." has implicit didactic implications, as it is intended as an example the reader can emulate and learn from.

The reader could also productively view Cage's project, which I have placed in reference to the mainstream of art and society within a framework of silent difference as opposed to vocal oppositionality, through the frame of Benjamin's aura. As Douglas Crimp explains, for Benjamin

> the aura has to do with the presence of the original, with authenticity, with the unique existence of the work of art in the place in which it happens to be. It is that aspect of the work that can be put to the test of chemical analysis or of connoisseurship.... For the museum has no truck with fakes or copies or reproductions. The presence of the artist in the work must be detectable; that is how the museum knows it has something authentic.
>
> But it is this very authenticity, Benjamin tells us, that is inevitably depreciated through mechanical reproduction, diminished through the proliferation of copies. 'That which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art,' is the way Benjamin put it. But, of course, the aura is not a mechanistic concept as employed by Benjamin, but rather a historical one.... The withering away of the aura, the dissociation of the work from the fabric of tradition, is an *inevitable* outcome of mechanical reproduction. This is something we have all experienced. We know, for example, the impossibility of experiencing the aura of such a picture as the 'Mona Lisa' as we stand before it at the Louvre. Its aura has been utterly depleted by the thousands of times we've seen its reproduction, and no degree of concentration will restore its uniqueness for us. (173-174)

In many ways, Cage works in "Writing…" to remove the aura surrounding the poem—due to its mechanical reproduction, Cage's text unauthors Joyce's novel. "Writing…" attempts to distance the author, as much as possible, from the poem without completely excising him/her. This distancing is not a complete excising because Cage did edit the final draft, allowing for the inclusion of an author-position that rests completely on the removal of words from the text (in this sense, Cage's author-position in "Writing…" is very similar to the function of an editor, one who works through subtraction, as opposed to the traditional author, one who works through addition). The mechanical means of producing the text, however, severely lessens the artistic aura surrounding the author; some readers view Cage's work as more of an exercise than as a literary creation because of this lessened aura.

Cage was certainly not alone in this attack on the aura, though he was one of the few challenging the aura in literary texts. In other artistic fields, this challenge became a dominant theme:

> This emptying operation, the depletion of the aura, the contestation of the uniqueness of the work of art, has been accelerated and intensified in the art of the past two decades. From the multiplication of silkscreened photographic images in the works of Rauschenberg and Warhol to the industrially manufactured, repetitively structured works of the minimal sculptors, everything in radical artistic practice seemed to conspire in that liquidation of traditional cultural values that Benjamin spoke of. And because the museum is that institution which was founded upon just those values, whose job it is to sustain those values, it has faced a crisis of considerable proportions. (Crimp 175)

During this time, then, artists used mechanical means to call into question the notion of what made an artist an artist. One should note here, too, though, that Warhol's and Rauschenberg's attacks merely lessened the artistic aura; they did not completely excise it (the attaching of their names to the pieces claims the pieces as artwork, and calls for a redefinition of what an artist is and what an artist is meant to do). Moreover, these attacks were all preceded by Duchamp's ready-mades, which were probably the greatest, most focussed attack on the artistic aura ever offered.

This attack on the artist's aura accounts for the success and shock of texts like "Writing…," but the story does not end here. As with Duchamp, Warhol, and Rauschenberg, the art world can incorporate these challenges to artistic aura by claiming this challenge as itself inherently artistic; it is in this way that the framework recuperates those the pieces that once argued vehemently against the framework. Paul Crowther offers an excellent narrative of this process:

> Any art objects set forth with internal critical intent will be assimilated by the legitimising discourse and market forces, and redistributed in the form of a *style.* This fate is promised as soon as the attempt to criticise the legitimising discourse of art is made internal to art itself. For here, the deconstructive tendency succeeds in fulfilling the legitimising discourse *despite* itself. To see why this is so, one must invoke the experience of the sublime, in terms of its two main expositors—Kant and Burke. In the Kantian version, when we encounter some phenomenon which overwhelms, or threatens to overwhelm, our imagination or emotions, this can sometimes issue in a kind of rational counterthrust. In such a case, we recognise and comprehend that which overwhelms or threatens to overwhelm us. Indeed, the very fact that a phenomenon which so manifestly defeats our sensible capacities can nevertheless be articulated and thence, in a sense, contained by reason, serves to vividly affirm the extraordinary scope and resilience of rational selfhood. I would suggest that an affirmative response on something like these lines is embodied in our engagement with certain aspects of Critical postmodernist art. Consider, for example, the overwhelming disaster motifs and dislocational effects of Critical Neo-Expressionism. These signify art's essential inadequacy in relation to expressing the complexity and immensity of the real world and its problems. However, the very fact that such a profound insight can be articulated within the idioms of art serves, paradoxically, to *vivify* the extraordinary scope of art itself as a mode of rational artifice. The disaster of [the] failure to signify is, as it were, contained and redeemed by the achieved signification of this failure within the visual means of art. The artist offers an affirmative and elevating experience of a kind of artistic sublimity. Now there is another—somewhat cruder—experience of the sublime which can also

> be related to Critical postmodernism (and, indeed, to any avant-garde art). One might call it the *protosublime*. Burke is its most effective expositor. According to him, prolonged states of inactivity and monotony are deleterious to our organic constitution. In order to counter this, we need to experience mild shocks--which will stimulate our sensibilities, but without involving any real sense of pain or danger.... In such a society [as ours], the rectified and monotonous pattern of life demands a compensating substitute for real experience. The shocks and thrills provided by media news items, or such things as violent adventure films and the like, fulfil this function. It is this vein of compensatory affective response, I would suggest, which is tapped by Critical postmodernism[s].... They have a shock or surprise value which rejuvenates and heightens our very sense of being alive. The means may be banal or ludicrous, but in the midst of social monotony and accelerating standardisation, the 'whatever-will-they-do-next' aspect of artistic innovation is a life-enhancing force. Its affective jolt, indeed, may even thematise the notion that the individual creator *can* resist the forces of reification to some degree—however trivial. (189-190)

In other words, art's ability to put forward such a critique of itself paradoxically proves that art is still vital because it can offer legitimate critiques. One could argue, then, that critical art inadvertently provides the latest art sensation. Along these lines, what happens is that the aura re-emerges around the artist. An artist challenges the legitimacy of art, by displaying a urinal or by writing mesostics "through" a text; the challenge works to call attention to the removal or lessening of the aura from that piece of art, since that piece of art momentarily shatters our notion of what art is. However, these attacks prove that art is still viable; the urinal and the text become examples of great works of art in themselves, and their creators become re-invested with the same artistic aura that they tried to dislodge. What happens is that the artist becomes a virtuoso for offering such a critique, and the virtuoso is the ultimate example of the auratic artist (Crowther 189). In the end, then, the artwork becomes something that was always already a great masterpiece; the opinion emerges that the lag time needed to realize the artist's genius is merely more proof of the art world's inability to recognise talent when they first see it. The initial period when the artwork was outside of the artistic mainstream becomes, after the fact, the result of an uneducated populace, as opposed to being the intentional goal of the artist.

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Thursday, April 29, 2004

A text like "Writing…," with its denial of linearity, syntax, and even (at moments) signification, can be seen as a piece of proto-Language poetry. Much in the same way that Stein's *Tender Buttons* has been viewed as a forerunner, Cage's work with language shares much of the techniques and goals of Language poetry. Jackson Mac Low, for instance, was a student of Cage's (at a class Cage offered on experimental music at the New School in 1956) and later also became a close friend of Cage and a supporter of his writing. One of the most important writing techniques the two shared was the use of chance to dictate the content. Of course, this use of chance partially diminishes the author's ego, but the fact that Cage was explicit in how he used chance is also extremely important. The long description of the chance techniques used in creating "Writing…" points out the lack of intention on Cage's part, but it also forces the reader into an awareness of the text as a construct. As the Language poets later theorized, this attention to the constructed nature of the text brings out a much different response in the reader from texts that work to disguise their construction: "[Charles] Bernstein's claim is that so-called natural- or plain-style poetry hypnotizes its reader by discouraging or repressing any awareness of its own artifice and intellectuality, and that we find a different notion of reader and reading in the poetry of writers... [who] make certain that the *construction* of their work is not disguised" (Lazer 24). Texts that present themselves as though they emerged fully formed from Zeus's brow promote a style of reading that places the reader as the passive recipient by invoking what is known in film studies terms as a narrative suture: "Cohan and Shires... suggest that reading or viewing narrative 'involves the continuous suturing of a narrated subject whose pleasure is secured, jeopardized, and rescued by a signifier" (Hawthorn 184).

The reader becomes immersed in the text, turning off his critical faculties in order to receive the text's code, or message. By foregrounding the composition style, Cage works to deny this hypnotic acceptance of the text as a seamless, perfect, unchallengeable unit. "Writing..." prods us to look at the man behind the curtain, the man who pulls the levers, and see that he is not the Great and All-knowing Oz; he's just a man, and this is a text that has been created by a man.

Furthermore, this focus on the how of literary creation also focuses the reader's attention on the tools that the text uses: words. Cage's attention to the word predates Language writing's focus on the material nature of language by several decades; the introduction to "Writing..." implicitly stresses the materiality of language, since it states that words are placed together in the text due to their materiality, their construction: "what makes a mesostic as far as I'm concerned is that the first letter of a word or name is on the first line and following it on the first line the second letter of the word or name is *not* to be found. (The second letter is on the second line)" ("Writing..." 134). The construction of the text depends on the physical nature of each word; the form originally includes those words in the source text that meet Cage's letter criteria and disallows those that don't. Cage did go on to edit the text by deleting words in order to arrive at the finished product, but this in no way diminishes the importance of the physical, material nature of the project: words gain entrance into the text depending on their letters, not depending on their meanings. What matters is the present, immediate, material nature of the words, not their transcendent meaning/signification. For Cage, this concentration on the letters of the words was a matter of Zen attention, which allowed for interpenetration and unimpededness to take place, as well as the anarchic cooperation with another text, which lessened the activity of Cage's own ego. As the Language writers would later argue, though, this focus on the materiality of language brings with it an awareness of how language constitutes our reality. Charles Bernstein argues that

> It is through language that we experience the world, indeed through language that meaning comes into the world and into being.... Our learning language is learning the terms by which a world gets seen.... I

> do not suggest that there is nothing beyond or outside of human language, but that there is meaning only in terms of language, that the givenness of language is the givenness of the world. (qtd. in Lazer 26)

For Bernstein and other Language writers, language does not merely describe our reality; it shapes it. What this means is that we perceive the world linguistically. Consequently, if people use language in a certain fashion for too long, that fashion becomes a given, and people perceive it as *natural*. Take, for example, Fred Wah's critique of the sentence:

> I think what I've always resisted about Ron [Silliman]'s call to the "new" sentence is that it is still the sentence that is posited as an hierarchic morphemic value. I understand Ron's description..., but the focus on the "sentence level" of language provokes resistance in me as one of those culturally inherited, grammatically dominant concepts that somehow remain in control of our thinking. ("Dear Hank" 225)

What does the sentence, as a grammatically dominant concept, do? It normalizes compartmentalization of information, for one thing, as opposed to promoting a more fluid sense of how material can truly interact. The sentence normalizes boundaries, not just on the page, but in the world: This is how material relates to each other. The sentence contains it. Material remains separate. It remains separated. It remains discrete. Moreover, the sentence also places each word within it at a lower level of importance than the importance of the sentence, and so the individual becomes less important that the community (or nation, to speak metaphorically). Finally, denying each individual word any true meaning (words will only attain their true meaning in relation to the other words used in the sentence) also normalizes delayed gratification: you must wait until the end of the sentence to understand what all of the words in that sentence mean.[42]

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[42] Ron Silliman, in his book *The New Sentence*, describes these ideas in this fashion:

> torn from any tangible connection to their human makers, [words] appear instead as independent objects active in a universe of similar entities, a universe prior to, and outside, any agency by a perceiving Subject. A world whose inevitability invites acquiescence. Thus capitalism passes on its preferred reality through language itself to individual speakers. And, in doing so, necessarily effaces that original connecting point to the human, the perceptible presence of the signifier, the mark or sound, in the place of the signified. (8)

Compartmentalization, the stressing of the communal good over the individual's, and delayed gratification are all tools used within democratic nations to control the populace; they are also antithetical to anarchy. When Cage challenges the reified use of language, then, he also challenges all the notions that language normalizes inside our minds, such as democracy's hidden political tools of compartmentalization and delayed gratification.

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There is a danger to setting up Cage as a forerunner to Language poetry. Part of Cage's project, obviously, was the diminishing of the ego and the destruction of the Romantic myth of the artist as prophet. My claim that Cage predated the challenges of Language poetry by several decades falls into the trap of the Romantic artist; I place Cage within the continuum of great artists, all of whom were exceptional. It is this exceptionality that Cage constantly worked against. How do we acknowledge that Cage's actions and interests predated similar artists' actions and interests by decades without claiming him as an exceptional forerunner? One possible way is to contextualize his achievements: Cage was not the only person to use language in chance-based way (his use of the *I Ching*, for example, proves that). And it can't be forgotten that writers such as Joyce, Stein, cummings, Apollinaire, Schwitters, Char, Ball, etc., all offered their own challenges to language and language systems. Cage was not working in a vacuum.

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Thursday, May 6, 2004

Cage's use of silence in his work avoids the oppositional stance that the avant-garde maintained, a stance that, ironically, supported what it meant to challenge. The avant-garde offers this unwitting support by entering into dialogue with what it wants to destroy; as Paul Mann argues, by entering into the mainstream's discursive economy, the avant-garde has already supported the status quo: "Other cultures do not bother to recuperate their margins: they just eradicate them or wall them out. But in late capitalism the margin is not ostracized; it is discursively engaged. The fatality of recuperation proceeds not from any laws of nature but from dialectical engagement, the (never altogether conscious) commitment by any artist or movement to discursive exchange" (15). However, Cage does not avoid entering this discursive economy; published by key publishers, invited to read across the world, recognized by many after him as a key figure in experimental poetry, Cage is very much engaged with the mainstream's discursive economy. As Mann argues, to a greater or lesser degree, all art that is successful enough to gain attention necessarily engages with the discursive economy of the mainstream:

> At a fundamental level works of art are determined neither by aesthetic nor by strictly ideological rules, but rather by their ability to move through and hence maintain the discursive apparatus. The work's value is defined above all by its power to generate discourse about it; within this economy a certain evaluative indifference in inherent in the very act of evaluation. The real value is circulation itself.... None of this is to deny the significance, within limits, of aesthetic and ideological determinations, but rather to place both under another, largely operational sign. Obviously the economy will prefer some ideological formations to others but it does not operate by any simple mechanism of conformity and suppression. On the contrary the economy depends on contentions, on ideological oppositions.... Exchange is its own ideology. (23)

The mainstream, according to Mann, craves new ideas, new challenges, new topics of discussion. In this sense, the challenges offered by experimental texts work as engines that help to drive forward the discursive economy, since the more new something is, the more possibility for discussion arises. The danger for Cage's work is that, like the historical avant-garde, it actually supports what it intends to challenge. By tearing apart language, Cage intends to dismantle the inherited codes of communication and to open up new, less regimented ways of thinking. However, according to Mann, the regimenting mainstream almost immediately recuperates these openings:

> The culture industry uses its vanguard to remap the foreign as a margin, a site comprehensible only in relation to itself. Elsewhere becomes

> colony, an arena of overproduction and underdevelopment for an imperial appetite that can assimilate and reproduce nearly every sort of exotica. In exchange the avant-colony is compensated with a discourse of radical difference, moral superiority, and an occasional government grant. In the end this process is so blatant that it becomes difficult even to speak of exogenous zones: the last colonial resource expropriated by the market is the idea of the foreign itself. (79)

If looked at in this fashion, the reader could dismiss the challenges that Cage offers as nothing more than naïve, doomed attempts to change the mainstream that actually merely open up new areas for the mainstream to dominate.[43] Even more frightening, Mann goes on to suggest that experimental art invalidates the *idea* of opposition: "The bourgeoisie continues to deploy the avant-garde as a surrogate, a spectacle of revolution… and then turns around and accuses it of not being revolutionary enough, hoping, in the process, to discredit the very idea of revolutionary art. Since the avant-garde represents opposition and the avant-garde is spurious, then opposition per se is spurious: no ground for antithetical art" (82). Cage's challenges to language, then, can be viewed as part of this unwittingly complicit challenge offered by avant-garde and experimental artists.

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However, does Mann's analysis go too far in arguing for a broad, blanket conformity in all avant-garde and experimental arts? What room is left for change, for oppositionality, if, as Mann argues, "The history of the avant-garde shows that wherever art engages the discursive economy it submits itself to its law. Whether or not the work can escape eventual absorption is no longer an issue: at the point of engagement absorption has already occurred" (133)? According to Mann's analysis, there is no hope for change whatsoever, because every challenge is necessarily not just ineffective; every challenge strengthens the status quo. In other words, Mann leaves open absolutely no avenue for resistance except for absolute silence; the only way to bring about change is to live off the grid, so to speak. It seems likely that Cage's use of silence, along Mann's line of analysis, would be nothing more than an avant-colony of silence, a way to incorporate and recuperate the silences of "Writing…"'s differently coded language. I don't think that Cage's refusal to engage the mainstream oppositionally would be enough to save his challenges in Mann's mind, because Cage's project is still a project of correction, of re-education. The result is that, according to Mann's theories, Cage would have been more successful at challenging the status quo if he had never offered his ideas at all. And this is the fundamental problem with Mann's ideas; he sees power flowing only in one direction, from the top down. There is no recognition that small challenges can bring about small gains. For Mann, it seems that if a challenge does not completely alter the entire system it challenges, then that challenge has failed. In this sense, Mann is a perfect example of the oppositional thinking that Cage's silence attempts to avoid, since it works according to an all or nothing, revolution not evolution, mindset.

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[43] It should be recognized that my decision to write about Cage's work can also be viewed as a recuperative move; by working to increase knowledge of Cage's challenges, I am necessarily making those challenges less and less vital, and more and more familiar. The odd form I have chosen to discuss Cage is intended to limit this recuperative move; I am unable to decide if my attempts have been successful.

Perhaps Jean-François Lyotard's thoughts can act as a corrective to Mann. Lyotard is concerned not with recuperation, but with education, as is Cage. According to Lyotard, "A work can become modern only if it is first postmodern. Postmodernism thus understood is not modernism at its end but in the nascent state, and this state is constant" ("Answering" 44). Where Mann sees experimental art as recuperated and tamed by an all-powerful mainstream, Lyotard views the movement art takes from being radical to being mainstream as a movement driven by the artwork; for Lyotard, it is the culture that must eventually learn the experimental artwork's codes, and it is this education that moves a work from experimental to mainstream (or from postmodern to modern, in his terms). Moreover, Lyotard views the challenges provided by experimental artworks as fundamentally coming from the work's form, not its content (as Mann seems to do). For Lyotard, it is a matter of representation[44]:

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[44] I've quoted much of this passage at length in my introduction (pg 47), but I find it extremely useful and so I feel it is appropriate to offer it again.

> Here, then, lies the difference: modern aesthetics is an aesthetic of the sublime, though a nostalgic one. It allows the unpresentable to be put forward only as the missing contents; but the form, because of its recognizable consistency, continues to offer the reader or viewer matter for solace and pleasure. Yet these sentiments do not constitute the real sublime sentiment, which is in an intrinsic combination of pleasure and pain: the pleasure that reason should exceed all presentation, the pain that imagination or sensibility should not be equal to the concept.
>
> The postmodern would be that which, in the modern, puts forward the unpresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable; that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unpresentable. A postmodern artist or writer is in the position of a philosopher: the text he writes, the work he produces are not in principle governed by preestablished rules, and they cannot be judged according to a determining judgment, by applying familiar categories to the text or to the work. Those rules and categories are what the work of art itself is looking for. The artist and the writer, then, are working without rules in order to formulate the rules of what *will have been done.* Hence the fact that work and text have the character of an *event*; hence, also, they always come too late for their author, or, what amounts to the same thing, their being put into work, their realization...always begin too soon. *Postmodern* would have to be understood according to the paradox of the future [*post*] anterior [*modo*]" ("Answering" 46).

For Lyotard, writers like Cage are working in the postmodern field, offering new forms. When Cage dismantles language in "Writing…," Lyotard would see an attempt to put forth the sublime in the form itself, thus offering a challenge to the notion of language; Mann would see merely another avant-colony, unwittingly driving forward the mainstream. At the heart of this difference is a differing opinion towards consensus: Mann craves a consensus—he wants the mainstream to be completely changed into a different totality; Lyotard, on the other hand, like Cage, champions dissensus and difference: "Let us wage war on totality; let us be witnesses to the unpresentable; let us activate the differences and save the honor of the name" ("Answering" 46). For Mann, plurality is the problem; for Lyotard, it is the solution.

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Monday, April 12, 2004

David W. Bernstein, in his article "'In Order to Thicken the Plot': Toward a Critical Reception of Cage's Music," offers a series of insights into Cage's work in music that also directly relate to his work with language. Bernstein begins by arguing that, unlike most critics, he does not believe Cage to be a postmodern artist. Considering Cage's reputation, this seems almost like sacrilege; however, Bernstein makes a strong case for putting Cage in a liminal space that is neither modernist nor postmodernist. Specifically, the crux of Bernstein's argument centres around Cage's politics. Bernstein points out that the modernist avant-garde, especially Dadaism and Futurism, saw their challenges as political as well as artistic: "Political and social activism, the rejection of tradition and institutionalized art, chaos, chance and irrationality, simultaneity, and the merging of art and life were the aesthetic principles endorsed by avant-garde movements in the early twentieth century" (13). Cage, quite obviously, drew heavily from Dada and other avant-garde movements; however, as Bernstein points out, Cage's mature, post-1950 work seems apolitical and therefore postmodern in its aesthetics. It seems as though Cage outgrew his avant-garde, modernist beginnings. This is where most critics leave the matter. It is also where Bernstein's critique separates itself from the pack.

For Bernstein, Cage's post-1950 work is not apolitical at all. On the contrary, it is extremely political—just in a less aggressive fashion. According to Bernstein,

> For Cage, a work of art might offer a model of how an ideal world would be constructed. This idea is stated explicitly in Cage's essay "The Future of Music" (1974): "Less anarchic kinds of music give examples of less

> anarchic states of society. The masterpieces of Western music exemplify monarchies and dictatorships. Composer and conductor: king and prime minister. By making musical situations which are analogies to desirable social circumstances which we do not yet have, we make music suggestive and relevant to the serious questions which face Mankind." The political intent of art conceived in this way lies in its offering us alternative epistemologies in the hope that these might lead to a radical reshaping of our political and social structures. This approach exemplifies what Marxist literary critic Raymond Williams has termed alternative culture, as opposed to oppositional culture, which also envisages social change but relies on a much more overt and confrontational political message. (15-6)

According to Bernstein, Cage turned his back on the confrontational *methods* of the modernist avant-garde, but he did not abandon its political *intent*. The importance of this distinction cannot be overstated when dealing with Cage's work; viewed with this in mind, even Cage's most abstract and seemingly apolitical works, such as all of his "Writing[s] through *Finnegans Wake*" and *Roaratorio*, remain implicitly committed to political and social change. Consequently, these seemingly most postmodern works never truly abandon a modernist commitment to using art to better the world. Moreover, Bernstein sees Cage's use of modernist ideals as nothing less than a fundamental revitalizing of modernism for the contemporary world:

> Cage's renewal of avant-garde aesthetics came at a time when the phrase "the avant-garde is dead" had started to appear in writings by both intellectual historians and literary critics. Noting the failed political, social, and artistic programs endorsed by avant-garde movements in the twentieth century, many scholars had concluded that the avant-garde was no longer viable. But through his own works, and by promoting ideas drawn from Marshall McLuhan, R. Buckminster Fuller, and anarchist politics, Cage transformed the socio-political program of the twentieth-century avant-garde, redirecting its concerns to problems facing us at the

> turn of the twenty-first century. His reformulation of avant-garde aesthetics is a contemporary manifestation of the modernist project initiated by Enlightenment philosophers more than two hundred years ago. (16)

Bernstein focuses our ideas about Cage along two parallel lines: Cage was both modernist and political; at the same time, he was post-modernist and, in a sense, post-political (in that he offered social and political alternatives as opposed to social and political confrontations). Bernstein sums up these differing ideas quite articulately, as well as offering an important warning to Cage's critics:

> When considering Cage's compositional methods, one finds that the postmodern and the modern coexist without contradiction. The same is true of Cage's political and social agenda. Through his redefinition of musical form Cage created works modeling desirable political and social structures. He was able to renew the modernist project dedicated to political and social change through art using postmodernist artistic techniques. As we assess Cage's role within the development of twentieth-century thought and musical style and intensify the critical evaluation of his creative output, it is crucial that we consider both the traditional and radical aspects of his aesthetics and compositional style. (40)

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For all of the strengths of Bernstein's article, there are two important areas that he does not really deal with. Although he does mention Cage's belief in political and social anarchy, he doesn't really do much more than that; moreover, the article offers no real discussion of Cage's belief in Zen.

In my opinion, Cage's use of anarchy lies at the heart of his aesthetics. For instance, anarchy theory sheds light on why Cage would adopt and later adapt avant-garde ideas. In particular, Cage believed in a Kropotkin-style anarchy; Kropotkin's anarchy was pacifistic, anti-specialization, and believed in free distribution of wealth and goods. Ideas and inventions, in addition, were communal for Kropotkin: "There is not even a thought, or an invention, which is not common property, born of the past and present. Thousands of inventors, known and unknown, who have died in poverty, have co-operated in the inventions of each of these machines which embody the genius of man" (190). Since there is no sense of private ownership, ideas are free for the taking; moreover, Kropotkin's view of cooperation works both synchronically and diachronically, which implies that any society is free to adapt any idea in any way that might be useful. Cage obviously had problems with the ego-centric nature of the avant-garde movements, as well as their confrontational methods; he believed both elements could be removed from the kernel of the avant-gardistes' project—using art to push for social and political change—without altering the fundamental purpose of their project. Moreover, taken to the logical next progression, readers should not treat Cage's own ideas as reified or fixed, because others are free to borrow and adapt his ideas in any way that might be useful.

Working along side of this anarchic belief in cooperation was Cage's belief in Zen, particularly the Zen notions of unimpededness and interpenetration. In many ways, Zen and anarchy were, in Cage's definition of the two, merely the east/west faces of the same coin. Cage, quoting Dr. Daisetz Suzuki, defines unimpededness and interpenetration in terms very similar to Kropotkin's style of anarchy:

> HE THEN SPOKE OF TWO QUALITIES: UNIMPEDEDNESS
> AND INTERPENETRATION. NOW THIS
> UNIMPEDEDNESS IS SEEING THAT IN ALL OF SPACE EACH THING AND
> EACH HUMAN BEING IS AT THE CENTER AND FURTHERMORE THAT EACH
> ONE BEING AT THE CENTER IS THE MOST HONORED
> ONE OF ALL. INTERPENETRATION MEANS THAT EACH ONE OF THESE
> MOST HONORED ONES OF ALL IS MOVING OUT IN ALL DIRECTIONS
> PENETRATING AND BEING PENETRATED BY EVERY OTHER ONE NO MATTER
> WHAT THE TIME OR WHAT THE SPACE. ("Composition as Process" 46)

The abundance of centres brings about a levelling effect, where no centre is more or less valuable than any other centre, which is a notion remarkably similar to anarchy's belief in the utter equality of all people. Likewise, the notion of interpenetration is almost identical to Kropotkin's synchronous and diachronous cooperation.

Obviously, to turn back to Bernstein's article, both anarchy and Zen stress the need to remove borders, be they political, social, or intellectual. For this reason, Cage's straddling of the modernist/postmodernist divide is more than an interesting matter for definition; this straddling is also another conscious or unconscious decision on Cage's part to put into practice his personal beliefs in anarchy and Zen. Considering how critics often underestimate the importance of intellectual thought to Cage's project, viewing the inability to define Cage within the rigid modernist/postmodernist divide would be a useful critical correction.

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Wednesday, April 21, 2004

Because it blocks the passage from signifier to signified, "Writing…" is a text that exists outside of memory; it is practically impossible to remember more than dislocated snippets from the text after one has read or listened to it because so much of the text refuses to follow patterns of logical communication that the reader could easily incorporate into his/her memory. The fact that it avoids memory is an important element in terms of Cage's desire for anarchy. As George Woodcock explains, anti-Utopianism lies at the heart of anarchy:

> the very idea of Utopia repels most anarchists, because it is a rigid mental construction which, successfully imposed, would prove as stultifying as any existing state to the free development of those subjected to it. Moreover, Utopia is conceived as a perfect society, and anything perfect has automatically ceased growing; even [William] Godwin qualified his rash claims for the perfectibility of man by protesting that he did not mean men could be made perfect, but that they were capable of indefinite improvement, an idea which, he remarked, "not only does not imply the capacity for being brought to perfection, but stands in express opposition to it." (23-4)

According to anarchy theory, society must avoid Utopianism of all sorts because it necessarily brings with it a termination of all progress. Instead of Utopianism, anarchy stresses process, a process that places society and all its members in a perpetual state of becoming, rather than being. The relationship to memory and reading is similar; if the text is to remain vibrant and in a state of progress, it cannot be reified. Memory, of course, depends upon reification; something becomes fixed once it is placed in memory (though memory does change over time, there is never a state of process; memory may alter or deteriorate, but each memory becomes fixed when the individual remembers it). "Writing…" and other texts that seek to create an anarchic form of reading work by denying the reader memory, thus placing the text in a constant state of process, of encounter. In order to re-access a text like "Writing…," rather than draw on memory, the reader must re-read the text, thus renewing and re-enacting the process of the text.

Certain stylistic elements in "Writing..." aid the denial of signification in this avoidance of reification. The disjunctive, non-linear, and non-cumulative nature of the text helps "Writing…" evade reification in the reader's mind by maintaining a constant present tense during the reading process. By this, I don't mean that the words that appear in "Writing…" are never in the past or future tense, but that the reader cannot build the text cumulatively. A text that builds cumulatively in the reader's mind (this happened, then this happened, then this happened, etc.) necessarily carries its own past within the narrative, since once the story begins it is imperative that the reader remember what has happened prior to the moment s/he is reading. However, "Writing…" contains no progression, partly due to the denial of signification, but also due to the explicitly dislocated and non-progressive nature of each text block. "Writing…" holds the reader in a non-progressive loop built around the spine words "JAMES JOYCE," which places each stanza in a non-hierarchical, non-progressive relationship with all of the other stanzas. Take, for example, this passage, chosen at random:

what we warn to hear Jeff is the woods of chirpsies cries
sock him up the oldcAnt rogue   group a   you have jest
a haM
bEamed
liStening through

grootvatter lodewiJk
bOldmans
You're
the jangtherapper of all joColarians
and thEy were as were they

rosing   he Jumps
leAps rizing
he's their Mark
cErtainly owe
he Sprit in his phiz (165)

From here, the text continues on, constantly offering more mesostics. The thing to realize is that each stanza is decontextualized. There is no cumulative progression from the "liStening through" at the end of the first stanza to the "grootvater lodewiJk" beginning the following stanza. Like the individual in an anarchistic community, or the unimpeded Zen individual, each stanza is essentially self-contained; the relationship between each stanza is absolutely egalitarian, since no stanza is more or less important than any of the others. Moreover, since each stanza's primary relationship is directed outwards, towards Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, and not inwards, towards each other, the connections between each stanza are necessarily arbitrary. The reader can supply these connections, but, due to the text's defeat of memory, these connections will also likely be forgotten after being forged. Finally, it is possible to extend this argument to the words inside each stanza; for the most part (the irregular appearance of logical phrases does not hold to this), all of the words in each stanza are also non-cumulative and non-progressive. All of this keeps "Writing…" vibrant—or at least as vibrant as any page-bound text can be.

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It must be granted that the idea of a non-cumulative text is a bit of a fantasy (at least before the development of hyper-text). "Writing…" could, of course, be read in a cumulative fashion; nothing in the text prohibits that (though Cage obviously made every attempt to avoid or dissuade the reader from doing so). But, it could happen. For example, it is theoretically possible to read and reread "Writing…" so many times that patterns appear between stanzas; moreover, it is possible that someone might reread the text so often that s/he would memorize it. Memorization would, obviously, introduce an element of pastness and a cumulative nature to the text. However—and this is where Cage succeeds in creating a non-cumulative text—this memorization could only occur within individuals; since it depends upon an intimate personal relationship between an individual reader and the text, this memorization could not really be effectively passed on to a reader who lacks this intimate relationship. Even the connections that memorization in the virtuoso reader would forge between stanzas or words within the text could not truly be passed on to another reader, since, without the intimate knowledge of the text, these connections would only be theoretical and abstract for the non-virtuoso reader.

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Thursday, April 15, 2004

Austin Clarkson, in his article "The Intent of the Musical Moment: Cage and the Transpersonal," draws an important (and often overlooked) distinction between experimental and avant-garde artists: "The term 'experimental' was rejected by [avant-garde] composers who took their works to be fully realized creations and not experiments in the sense of trials or tests. But the idea appealed to Cage…" (66). The avant-garde, like so much of Modernism, maintained a specific, desired outcome, a specific thought, moral, or emotion to be transmitted from author/creator/ prophet to audience/recipient/pupil. Experimental artists, on the other hand, engaged with their art and their audience in a completely different way; for them, the point was not the direct transmission to the audience through of the piece of art, which places the emphasis on the outcome of the artistic production, but rather the process itself of creating the work of art. For experimental artists, the outcome, the finished product, could take whatever shape that the parameters of the process allowed. This not only precludes the possibility of relaying through the artwork any specific idea; it also opens up the possible range of interpretations that the audience can have towards the artwork. Though Clarkson is specifically concentrating on music in his article, Cage's literary work works in the same fashion. In a text like "Writing...," Cage's interest was in the process of play with Joyce's text, not in the relation of any specific ideas, phrases, images, etc. The final text of "Writing..." (which isn't, in some ways, a final text at all, considering that Cage made at least three more writings through *Finnegans Wake*) contains no specific message at all—unless you count that as its message, which is what Clarkson goes on to imply we should do.

Clarkson introduces a set of valuable terms to discussions of Cage's writing: representational and presentational art. Drawing on Harry T. Hunt's work on these terms, Clarkson offers the following definitions:

> Cage's experimental music is not an art of representation, where meaning is derived from the relation between a signifier and a referent. It is presentational. Of presentational states, Hunt writes,
>
> > meaning emerges as a result of an experiential immersion in the expressive patterns of the symbolic medium. It appears as spontaneous, pre-emptory imagery and is fully developed in the expressive media of the arts. Here, felt meaning emerges from the medium in the form of potential semblances that are "sensed," polysemic and open-ended, and so unpredictable and novel. It is the receptive, observing attitude common to aesthetics, meditation, and classical introspection that allows such meaning to emerge.
>
> By limiting representation as much as possible, Cage intensified the presentational function of music. (66-7).

Presentational art creates and re-creates its code(s) of meaning only at the moment when the audience encounters or re-encounters the artwork. There is no inherent, transcendent meaning in the presentational work of art, as there is in the representational work of art. The difference between the two is that the representational work relies on traditional discursive codes in order to create its meaning, while the presentational work abandons traditional discursive codes in order to create its meaning.

For this reason, audiences often deem a presentational work of art to be nonsense when they first encounter it, because audiences cannot successfully relate their systems of meaning (logic, signification, tradition, etc.) to the presentational work. Instead, presentational works require that the audience learn the unique systems of meaning that each individual presentational work of art contains. Once the audience infers these codes, they begin to "understand" the piece's meaning.[45] However, the audience should not overlook the active role that they play in determining what these codes are, as well as what they mean.

This emphasis on the audience's role in the creation of meaning lies at the heart of Cage's aesthetics. Clarkson looks at this emphasis through music ("Experimental music thus shifts attention from the piece of music as a representable, transcendent object to the felt meanings and potential semblances" (67)), but it would be just as appropriate to look at it in terms of Cage's writings. Conveniently, these ideas not only carry over to the literary text, they have also already been well-defined: instead of the presentational/representational distinctions, we have Roland Barthes' writerly/readerly texts, described by Steve McCaffery:

> The readerly is the classic text, grounded in a transmission theory of communication and in an ideology of exchange.... The writerly text by contrast is resistant to habitual reading; it ... mak[es] the reader no longer a consumer but a producer of the text. The writerly proposes the unreadable as the ideological site of a departure from consumption to

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[45] All of this is similar in nature to Lyotard's comment that "A work can become modern only if it is first postmodern" ("Answering" 44). Lyotard suggests that a new form of art will confuse the audience because the audience does not understand the systems of meaning that this art follows. Eventually, the audience will learn these codes, and art that was once viewed as meaningless will become meaningful. The positive side of this process is that Lyotard views it as art educating the public, by offering new ideas, new systems of meaning, new mimeses of life, thus constantly enlarging society's realm of knowledge.

However, many theorists view this process of learning a piece of art's systems of meaning as the process of reification and recuperation. Picasso's art was once presentational; now, with the passage of time and through the adopting and normalizing of his art's systems of meaning (including, of course, all of its challenges and critiques of society) by other artists, his art is representational. This means that the unfixed systems of meaning originally contained within the art have become fixed and transcendent. Consequently, one overwhelming question lurks behind all pieces of presentational art; is it truly presentational, or is it merely a representational work of art that has yet to be reified? I don't believe this question can ever truly be answered.

> production, presenting the domain of its own interior, interacting elements… as the networks and circuits of an ultimately intractable and untotalized meaning. ("Language Writing" 143)

Here as well, the emphasis is on the audience's creative engagement with the writerly (presentational) text. In terms of "Writing…," then, what is important is not so much Cage's ideas and intentions, but the audience's reactions and thoughts when reading the poem. In this sense, Cage's nonsense text does contain a message, but it is a liberatory message (as opposed to the prescriptive messages avant-garde texts contain). To misquote McLuhan, for Cage the lack of message is the message.

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Thursday, April 22, 2004

Despite the positive intentions and ramifications of Cage's silence that Jonathan D. Katz sees, one must acknowledge the negative aspects of this stance. In a text such as "Writing…," where Cage maintains a silence through his denial of personal speech—the words he uses are not his—the author can rather easily dismiss any part or even the entire text because he didn't *write* it. In this sense, the silence Cage maintains carries with it a hidden safety parachute: if the text meets resistance, he can deny any personal responsibility (one could argue that the nonintentional text intentionally foregrounds this lack of responsibility for just this reason). For a writer such as Cage, who placed so much political importance on actions and responsibility on the individual and her/his actions, this is either a critical blindspot or a moment of Cagean paradox: the nonintentional writer denies personal responsibility in the act of creation.[46]

Moreover, Katz dismisses the gay community's calls for Cage to openly acknowledge his homosexuality on the grounds that to declare his homosexuality would have been to turn his back on his personal project and principles: "When scholars and activists were rooting for Cage to come out, were they asking him to turn his back on his own convictions about silence and the work it could do and thereby ignoring the distinction between their political claims on him and his own life-long principles?" (54) Katz resorts to defending Cage's silence on this issue because Cage's personal beliefs offered an alternative to the oppositional politics being practised by the gay community. This argument certainly holds merit, but I think it must also be acknowledged that there is a convenience to Cage's silence in this case that is troubling, to say the least. No one could reasonably deny that Cage's silence on this issue helped his career in a way that openly acknowledging his homosexuality certainly would not have. In this sense, then, where do we draw the line between Cage following his personal beliefs and Cage merely following a convenient plan of personal safety?

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[46] To be honest, I am not aware of Cage himself ever using this loophole to deny personal responsibility for the work that he produced; however, this possibility lurks inside all of his mature, chance-based work. So far, I have been unable to find Cage's reaction to the "art riot" that erupted in Italy in 1977 after Cage finished a nearly three-hour long reading of "Empty Words, (Part III)," a text that, coincidently, appears in the same book as "Writing…."

The case of Robert Duncan can offer a different perspective on Cage's silence. Duncan was openly gay during most of his life; indeed, he published the essay "The Homosexual in Society" in 1944, an essay that, in Duncan's own words (offered in retrospection years later), "had at least the pioneering gesture, as far as I know, of being the first discussion of homosexuality which included the frank avowal that the author was himself involved" (38).

In the essay, Duncan defends homosexuals and writes of homosexuality as a "non-degenerate" act, while also explicitly criticizing the homosexual cliques he saw around him. Like Cage, Duncan was a firm believer in anarchy, but, instead of remaining silent of the issue of homosexuality, Duncan chose to openly acknowledge his sexuality in order to work against the "homosexual cult" working in America at the time:

> What I think can be asserted as a starting point is that only one devotion can be held by a human being seeking a creative life and expression, and that is a devotion to human freedom, toward the liberation of human love, human conflicts, human aspirations. To do this one must disown *all* the special groups (nations, churches, sexes, races) that would claim allegiance. To hold this devotion every written word, every spoken word, every action, every purpose must be examined and considered. The old fears, the old specialties will be there, mocking and tempting; the old protective associations will be there, offering a surrender of one's humanity congratulation upon one's special nature and value. It must

> always be recognized that the others, those who have surrendered their humanity, are not less than oneself. It must be always remembered that one's own honesty, one's battle against the inhumanity of his own group (be it against patriotism, against bigotry, against—in this special case—the homosexual cult) is a battle that cannot be won in the immediate scene. The forces of inhumanity are overwhelming, but only one's continued opposition can make any order possible, will give an added strength for all those who desire freedom and equality to break at last those fetters that seem now so unbreakable. (47-8)

Duncan's position—that a person's only allegiance is to humanity as a whole, not to what we would now call special interest groups—is based on anarchist assumptions of equality, cooperation, and non-hierarchality, just as Cage's is. However, Duncan fundamentally differs with Cage because Duncan is committed to oppositional politics; as a result, Duncan implicitly views any form of silence as wrong (and perhaps even immoral), since it allows the dominant and dominating status quo to maintain power over individuals.[47]

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[47] The repercussions of Duncan's decision to openly declare his homosexuality in 1940s America should not be overlooked. Duncan states that the writing of the essay "was a personal agony" ("The Homosexual in Society" 39) and then relates how an editor who had accepted Duncan's poem "Toward an African Elegy" revoked the acceptance. The editor offered Duncan this explanation:

> I feel very sure we do not wish to print the poem, and I regret very much to decline it after an original acceptance. I must say for the record that the only right I feel in this action is that belatedly, and with your permission, I read the poem as an advertisement or a notice of overt homosexuality, and we are not in the market for literature of this type.
>
> I cannot agree with you that we should publish it nevertheless in the name of freedom of speech; because I cannot agree with your position that homosexuality is not abnormal. It is biologically abnormal in the most obvious sense. I am not sure whether or not state and federal law regard it so, but I think they do; I should not take the initiative in the matter, but if there are laws to this effect I concur in them entirely. There are certain laws prohibiting incest and polygamy, with which I concur, though they are only abnormal conventionally and are not so damaging to a society biologically. ("The Homosexual in Society" 43)

Considering such an intellectual climate, where an editor can offer a veiled threat of legal action against a homosexual artist, one must keep in mind the obvious benefits to Cage for his silence.

Tuesday, March 29, 2005

Bert Almon, in a letter to me, comments that "I do think you should (if you haven't yet) mention John Crowe Ransom [the editor who revoked the acceptance of Duncan's poems] by name. As the man who coined the term 'New Criticism' and founded the Kenyon School of Criticism, he had enormous influence and his rejection of Duncan was therefore a kind of establishment rejection." I originally followed

I don't mean to suggest that Duncan was right and Cage was wrong in their respective stances towards silence. What I merely want to point out is that Katz's implied belief that Cage's silence—both in his work and in his life—was the only possible stance that Cage could possibly take and remain true to his principles is wrong. There were other avenues available for gay anarchist artists in the 1950s, as Robert Duncan's stance proves. We cannot overlook the fact and the implications that Cage *chose* silence; silence was not thrust upon Cage.

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Tuesday, April 20, 2004

Cage's decision to include the punctuation from Joyce's text "not in the mesostics but on the pages where they originally appeared, [with] the marks disposed in the space and those other than periods given an orientation by means of *I Ching* chance operations" ("Writing…" 135) introduces a visual element to "Writing…" that opens up several areas of investigation. These punctuation marks, obviously, have nothing to do with providing grammar; instead, they openly deny the relevance of grammar within the text. Their use is ironic; they become nothing more than empty signifiers. Where writers traditionally use them to lessen the amount of noise in a text, Cage uses them as graffiti on the page in order to introduce more noise, and so they become visual signs that the status quo does not apply within this text. Moreover, Cage's text gives the misused punctuation a material, embodied presence, a presence that conventional texts usually deny punctuation. The whole point of punctuation within a written text is to be a ghostlike, disembodied, non-present presence; the reader should not be consciously aware of it, and she should instead focus on the words. In conventional usage, punctuation should not draw attention to itself. However, "Writing…" gives grammar a material presence precisely because it denies this disembodied nature; by making the punctuation marks into obviously empty signifiers, Cage draws attention to the powerful role grammar's disembodied nature plays within normal language. Unlike

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Duncan's decision not to mention Ransom; throughout his essay, Duncan steadfastly refuses to name Ransom, referring to him only as "an eminent editor." However, at Almon's suggestion, supported by his reasoning, and my own personal desire to out Ransom's homophobic bigotry, I have decided (quite happily) to name him.

words in a sentence, there is no interpretation of a punctuation mark and so the reader accepts these marks as powerless and ignores them as unimportant. For Cage, however, these marks are intricately tied up with the creation of regulated order—and regulation, for Cage, is a process that limits individual freedom and must therefore be avoided. For example, Cage draws the connection between grammar and regulatory order in the introduction to "Writing…": "Due to N. O. Brown's remark that syntax is the arrangement of the army, and Thoreau's that when he heard a sentence he heard feet marching, I became devoted to nonsyntactical 'demilitarized' language" ("Writing…" 133). Punctuation marks are the policing bodies of grammar; they provide the regulatory system that ensures grammar is at the same time omnipresent within written language and, because of its omnipresence, unwittingly accepted as the *normal* state of language. It is this seeming normality that Cage sees as the problem, since it is dependent upon a lack of attention, a carelessness on the part of the users of language, which, in turn, points to the submissive position that users of language unwittingly assume in the face of language (and submissiveness, with its inherent power relations, should not be confused with passiveness, which does not contain an inherent power relation). Language becomes a controlling force in people's lives without people realizing it; people's relationship to language becomes reified, because they become the tool of language, as opposed to language being the user's tool, as it is for people with a creative relationship with language (such as Joyce). The underlying problem with all of this is that language itself becomes a reified code, and if people think within language, thought itself becomes reified. The status quo comes to be viewed as the natural state of things, as opposed to the status quo being only the current state (which implies not only that things *will* change, but that they are changeable through people's actions).

Another important aspect of Cage's use of punctuation marks as graffiti is that it places an emphasis on the material page. These marks are not present when the text is spoken or heard; they exist only when one reads the physical page. Consequently, the page becomes a pictorial plane, which means that the words on the page are not only signifiers, but images. Usually, written language is merely a signifier that points towards the signified, which exists in an ideal realm above the text; the text itself is only a means towards gaining access to that ideal cognitive end. However, in "Writing…" the use of the page as a pictorial plane denies this signifier/signified hierarchy. Working alongside the use of graffiti is the spine embedded in the centre of each mesostic. The silent "JAMES JOYCE," which provides the only regulation to the text, is also part of the physical, pictorial page only, and so strengthens the visual nature of the poem. It is probably going too far to suggest that "Writing…" is a visual poem, considering the importance of sound in the work, but the visual elements cannot be overlooked. Consequently, the words on the page, the literal images of the words, become as important as the sounds of the words, and both these signifiers, the images and the sounds, become more important than the signified—in fact, the level of the signified is absent for much of the text, due to the use of nonsyntactical language and nonce-words.[48] See, for example, page 141:

Japijap
amOng
sibYlline
mulaChy
kingablE khan

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[48] Louis Cabri defines the fundamental difference between neologisms and nonce-words:

> Nonce-word strikes me as the complete opposite of neologism. A neologism exists only during the passage from unofficial everyday usage to officially-designated new word of a particular language. Once added to a dictionary, the word is no longer a neologism (historical derivation aside), and is no different from any other word that the dictionary may house. A nonce-word rarely gains official status, rarely become *like* any other word.
>
> Unlike the neologism, a nonce-word is… more likely to create a meaning for itself only *after* its inaugural event, as "word," has occurred. A nonce-word is more likely to be at first, and to an extent to remain, sense-less. For the most part it seems that the neologism works the other way: top down – from a coined meaning that is declared necessary and that requires definition, to its widespread usage. A neologism transcends its original context of use, becomes an atomized word circulating in new sentences, contexts. A nonce-word does not so easily, if ever, transcend its inaugural context and event: the exceptions generally become neologisms (e.g. Schwitters's "Merz"). Unlike a neologism that in certain respects fulfills a linguistic need which therefore must be officially declared and instituted, a nonce-word slips into linguistic usage for the most part unnoticed, without apparent need. ("Nonce-word Pragmatics: A Sketch")

For Cabri, neologisms are words that are intended to fill a semantic void; they are shocking only until they are properly defined. Neologisms are constantly moving towards being defined and are consequently not intended to be disruptive. Nonce-words, on the other hand, attempt to deny any definition at all; they are intended to exist outside of definition, and so are intended to shock the reader with their otherness each and every time they are encountered.

practical Jokepiece
cecelticocommediAnt
his house about hiM with
invariablE
broadStretched

Juke and kellikek families
at One time
annoYing
C.
Earwicker

"Japijap," "mulachy," "cecelticocommediant," and "kellikek" are all nonce-words, words that deny the expected move away from signifier to the signified. There is also no chance to actually define what parts of speech these words are, because the lack of punctuation removes the level of the sentence from the text. At one and the same time, all of the words in the text, whether they are sensical or nonsensical, are both isolated and in equal connection to all of the other words in the entire text (the interpenetration is absolute in the poem). Consequently, even when phrases do present themselves within the text, such as "his house about him" in the quotation above, the reader cannot properly dwell within these phrases in order to solidly access the level of the signified; these phrases exist as isolated moments of sense in a raging sea of nonsense. All of the areas of indeterminacy make it impossible for the reader to move away from the signifier level of language in "Writing…"

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Cage's use of the page as a pictorial space also brings into play my discussions in the chapter on McCaffery's *Carnival* panel concerning the lack of depth in the text. Refer to the sections from Wednesday, November 19, 2003 in Chapter one for these ideas.

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Wednesday, April 14, 2004

Zen's unimpededness and interpenetration and anarchy's co-operation and non-hierarchicality come together in a fundamental way in "Writing for the Second Time Through *Finnegans Wake*." In terms of the authorship of the text, both the title and the entire text acknowledge that John Cage did not write this poem; at least not in the normal realms of authorship. For example, Cage's text never divorces itself from Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*—Cage did not, in the strictest sense of the term, actually *write* any of "Writing…," because Cage did not add a single word that wasn't already included in *Finnegans Wake*. In this sense, Cage's text is not the product of creation, but of citation. Joyce remains in the text as the almost God-like originator, the absent presence who created the word-matrix from which Cage can work. The result is that the reader can make no clear distinction of authorship; did Cage write this text, or did Joyce? is Cage merely excerpting *Finnegans Wake*, or is "Writing…" a new literary creation? I think Cage's practice intentionally blurs the answers to these questions. The fact of the matter is that Joyce *did* write these words. In many cases, Joyce actually *created* these words (a look at the first line alone of Cage's text, "wroth with twone nathanJoe," shows three of Joyce's nonce words). In this sense, it is impossible to think of Cage creating the text. On the other hand, Cage works with language with a freedom that Joyce did not envision, since Cage is concerned with the words only as individual words, not with how they work together to build a narrative. Consequently, the word combinations that Cage develops throughout "Writing…" are Cage's product alone; to suggest that certain words or even phrases are invalid for a writer to use because they appear in an earlier text basically disallows any writing, since words have always already been used by someone else, and it is always only in the combinations of words that writers display individuality or creativity.

So, in a sense, Joyce wrote "Writing…" and Cage wrote "Writing…." By turning towards Zen and anarchy, I would argue that this seemingly contradictory statement can be rationally understood. There is a sense of homage in Cage's text, an attempt to pay respects to a great artist, to declare the singularity of Joyce's brilliance, while, at the same time, to deny the Romantic idea of the solitary creator. Anarchy denies the notion of individual creation; Joyce, obviously, did not create the language he used (though he did create many of the words), nor did Joyce work in a vacuum in terms of narrative, symbols, characterization, etc. Anarchic cooperation promotes the idea that the community (nurture) creates the individual much more than genetics (nature) does. People, according to anarchy, are who they are because of the people, places, and things that surround them. Joyce is, in this sense, merely one creative node for this community to express itself; Cage is another, and his text is a creative borrowing, a cooperation across time and space with Joyce and the community that Joyce represents. The result of this cooperation is that neither is truly the *author* of the text; both play significant roles in Cage's text, but the text also implies that all created objects are the result of cooperation, and so James Joyce, the man, as well as "JAMES JOYCE," the linguistic spine to the mesostics, are also both creations of a larger community, as is John Cage himself.

All of this, of course, relates to Zen as well. Both Joyce and Cage are centres, complete and fundamental in and of themselves. As unimpededness suggests, both centres offer significant force over all who come near them; however, they do not offer more force than any other person/centre does. Interpenetration suggests that all centres, all people, though they are complete at every moment, constantly influence and are influenced by other centres. Every person, then, though complete at every moment, is also changing and developing at every moment. In this sense, unimpededness and interpenetration relate quite strongly to a sense of perpetual becoming, as opposed to a sense of static being. Joyce and Cage, through their texts, influence and change each other; they offer each other new possibilities. Moreover, Cage's text is an experiment, an attempt to stumble across something interesting. As an experiment, it is intentionally incomplete; there are a myriad other experiments that can follow Cage's example. The result is that "Writing..." incorporates a diachronic, dialogic stance, since it both reaches back to Joyce and forward to future experimenters, leaving the text open to further revisions and re-envisionings.

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The cooperative nature of "Writing…" defers, if not completely denies, the authority normally bestowed on the author. I mean by this much more than the conservative, knee-jerk reaction of "anyone could write this," although that reaction is more in line with Cage's beliefs than some people might at first think. Specifically, the denial of the ego is a fundamental part of Cage's aesthetic project. He engages in a cooperative, dialogic type of creativity in order to deny the Romantic ideal of the author; moreover, the use of strict formal rules in the creation of the text also severely and intentionally downplays the imaginative function. Cage, of course, did edit "Writing…" and so the creative faculty was not completely denied, but it was curtailed. All of this was intended to severely restrict the role of the creative ego; indeed, Cage has nothing to *say*, in a conventional sense, in "Writing…" or in most of his other cooperative work.

Because of the non-intentional nature of "Writing…," the text does not express an authorial personality or creative will, both of which are fundamental pillars of traditional authority. Furthermore, there is a very real sense that anyone could have created "Writing…," since it is based on very mechanical aleatory procedures. If someone else had put into practice the specific rules that Cage developed to create the mesostics for "Writing…," he or she would have (ignoring the possibility of human error) developed an identical text from which to edit the final version. "Writing…" therefore intentionally denies the author any true notion of individuality, since, once the rules are set, the text will be the same no matter who writes (or, perhaps more accurately, no matter who collates) the resulting text. This lack of individuality certainly holds with Zen and especially anarchy theory, but the result is that the text specifically denies the author the elements of authority: individuality, creativity, and expression.

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Friday, April 16, 2004

However, is "Writing…" completely free of any of Cage's own ideas, thoughts, beliefs, morals? The answer is a tricky one, and seems to exist somewhere in the *yes and no* response. On one hand, Cage did not embed any particular moral or specific message; on the other hand, Cage's entire project was, in a sense, didactic and very focused on transcendent, liberatory goals.[49] Austin Clarkson's analysis provides a tie to both David W. Bernstein's and Jonathan D. Katz's articles. All three critics share a common focus on the passive nature of Cage's aesthetics and goals. Whether it is Bernstein's non-confrontational, alternative culture Cage, Katz's silent, anti-binary Cage, or Clarkson's experimental, presentational Cage, an underlying element of passivity ties all three of these Cages together. Cage does not preach, browbeat, demand, or even coax his audience into agreeing with his ideas; instead, Cage merely puts forth his ideas in such a way that people may or may not engage with them when they encounter his work. Cage leaves the audience free to engage the alternative culture, silence, presentationality, etc. in his work; however, because Cage does not believe in actively converting the audience, the audience is also completely free to ignore these elements, to react representationally, to dismiss Cage's work as mere nonsense or gobbledygook.

However, this freedom to choose, this allowance to react in whatever way they want, does have underlying strengths. If, for example, a reader chooses to denounce Cage's "Writing…" as utterly useless wordplay, the text allows that response—but it should be recognized that even if the reader chooses to dismiss the text, the text has *provoked the reader to choose*, a choice that more active, representational texts work to deny. In this sense, Cage's passivity allows him to win no matter what, since he keeps his goals hidden and seemingly so small: make the audience pay attention, listen, read. It makes no matter what the audience's response to the work is, because it will be the audience's response. Cage's passive stance provokes an active position from the audience, and the beautifully clever nature of this stance is that even to dismiss the work is to implicitly, often unwittingly, validate Cage's project.

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The importance of audience response, whether we look at it in terms of presentational listening or writerly reading, is fundamental to Cage's project because it resituates the active role as the audience's role, not the artist's. This resituating was also more important than the individual work of art itself; consequently, the quality of the artwork (as is typical for an experimental artist) was a secondary concern. The primary concern was to re-educate the audience through placing them in the active role. This brings in the notion of paradox: how can Cage be non-didactic but educational? how can Cage be passive but also challenging? how can Cage be both a great artist and be an artist who placed quality of the work as secondary? The nature of paradox in Cage's work helps us to understand these contradictions. As Clarkson states, many of Cage's works are openly paradoxical; take for example, his musical piece *4'33*," which is silent music. But paradox plays a specific role in Cage's project: "Paradox is designed to subvert rational cognition…. Paradoxical though it seems, *4'33*" offers listeners the opportunity of performing in the purely presentational mode. If they choose to perform the piece, they find, as Dewey would say, that it calls not for understanding but for 'undergoing'" (Clarkson 71). This distinction between logical understanding and experiential undergoing again places the audience in the active role; the reader/listener cannot rely on traditional codes of understanding, and so all s/he has to rely on is personal experience (both of the encounter with the artwork and also of the lived experiences they bring to that encounter). Paradox, which Cage usually accomplishes in his work through the seemingly passive technique of juxtaposition, openly denies the appropriateness of logical understanding to truly be able to deal with what is being juxtaposed. Paradox also shifts the focus away from the juxtaposed elements, the elements of text, towards the implied, unknowable relationship between the two elements, which only exists as either sub- or super-text. Clarkson refers to this focus when he argues against conceptualist interpretations of *4'33"*:

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[49] In a sense, this division exists between Cage's texts, such as "Writing…," which often avoid specific meanings by avoiding specific messages, and his paratextual materials, which often describe the goals he has for his texts in specifically political terms. On one hand, it is impossible to really divorce the text from the paratext; on the other hand, it isn't really possible to use many of the texts themselves to prove or argue for Cage's political messages.

> In general, the conceptualists interpret *4'33*" as the collection of sounds, whether from the audience or outside the auditorium, that are noticed during the given time. But by concretizing the silent piece as a particular collection of physical sounds or as the null and void, they miss Cage's requirement that the act of listening is paramount, and that the minimal condition of the musical fact is the reflexive relationship between sound

> and the listener. (70)

The conceptualists attempt to place the focus on the text, on the ambient sounds that the listener hears during the performance of *4'33"*; this attempt would also redefine Cage as the active, though non-intentional, composer, since the text would necessarily be his creation. Clarkson rightly argues against this attempt, placing the focus of a text like *4'33"* on the act of listening, on the audience's active engagement with the text, especially the paradox of silent music with which it confronts the audience (it must be remembered that, during the performance of *4'33"*, a pianist sits at a piano, and that s/he opens and closes the keyboard to mark the beginning and ending of movements; the visual elements stress the paradoxical nature of the piece).

To relate this to a text like "Writing…" needs merely to define the elements. The paradox in "Writing…" is the silent text, the text that is both language and not language, a type of silent speech (since it lacks a linguistic message). Cage's role is again passive (explicitly noted this time, due to the passive, receptive nature of his mesostics), and the active role belongs to the reader/listener; it is the reader who must determine not just what the work means, but if there is, indeed, any meaning in the text at all. The reader is transformed into presentational, active, creative-recipient (yet another paradox), and it is this transformation that is Cage's purposeless purpose (or his actively passive desire, which is also a non-desire). Clarkson's comments about this state are directly appropriate to the experience of reading "Writing…" (which, by the way, is another paradox):

> [Cage] found that through music one can enter another world in which the natural flow of sounds brings a sense of excitement and mystery. The pleasure, peace, and spiritual abundance that he found affirmed for him that this transformed state of being was most desirable. For Cage the musical piece was merely the agent or conduit for evoking an act of listening that advances the individual's spiritual development. (72)

The written text "Writing…" is also merely the agent for evoking an act of listening-reading, an active response that elevates the reader to a Zen-like state of attention.

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Tuesday, May 4, 2004

My comments (from Monday, May 3) that argue that a close reading of "Writing…" is a counterproductive way of dealing with or inhabiting the poem should not be taken as statements denying any meaning in the poem. There are, of course, moments when language does seem to coalesce into logical sense. Take, for instance, this passage:

Jamey
Our
countrY
is a ffrinCh
soracEr this is

the grand mons inJun this is
the Alps hooping to sheltershock
the three lipoleuMs this is
thEir
legahornS ("Writing…" 138)

While it is by no means straightforward, there is certainly some meaning to be had from this passage. Obviously, it is a listing of definitions of "our country"; the definitions offered are odd and disjunctive (how can a country be "a frrinch soracer," which, I think, could reasonably be deciphered as a French sorcerer? or is that a French saucer? how can a country be the grand mons Indian? or is that grand mons engine?), but the basic form is recognizable, which greatly limits the possible meanings. Normal syntax, in other words, appears from time to time in the work, and when it does it provides moments where logical meaning is possible; all that is required is to translate or make sense of the words.

I would argue that the appearance of these moments of normal syntax are not moments where Cage fails to achieve a truly disruptive text (Cage attempts to do away with Joyce's "syntalks," after all), but instead that these moments work to highlight Cage's disruptions. What I mean by this is that the irregular appearance of normative syntax in "Writing…" precludes the reader dismissing the poem as mere nonsense; such a dismissal would also render Cage's disruptions as merely the disruptions of incompetence or pointless play. However, the moments of normative syntax prove that there is a method to Cage's madeness [sic]. Moreover, the moments of normative syntax also keep the reader attentive in a way that a purely nonsensical text cannot. To say that a text is nonsense is to safely categorize it, to render it defined and reified; this definition operates to re-establish logical sense in the reader's mind: that text is nonsense, which I understand logically, since I understand what nonsense is (or is not). The moments of disjunctive sense that appear in "Writing..." deny the text's easy definition; it cannot be defined as sense or nonsense, but instead it exists in some unlocalizable middle ground. It is both and neither sense and/nor nonsense. For these reasons, the moments where syntax becomes normalized are fundamentally part of Cage's project to destabilize syntax.

Furthermore, the interplay between syntax and non-normative syntax in the poem keeps the poem itself from becoming trapped within any one system. A poem that is completely non-normative is as much a slave to its system as a poem that is completely normative; all that has been altered is the master to which language must bow.

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Part of Cage's major tool to disrupt normative syntax is the removal of words. Cage's edits, his personal choice to remove words, is the primary tool used in "Writing…" to disrupt syntax. The text functions according to a subtractive principle. This point seems obvious, but what I mean is that there are moments when the text puts the neologisms, nonce words, foreign words, and phonetically spelled words, through the removal of connective words, into close proximity with each other. For example:

christies and Jew's
bAllybricken
aniMal's sty
strEet
Sta troia

some maJar
bOre
erchenwYne
Crumwall
maximus Esme (146)

What we are missing here are the supportive words that would explain the connections between these words and phrases; in particular, the verbs have been removed, leaving us with a string of words whose only connection is that they occur together in these stanzas. Through a subtractive principle, Cage forces a paratactical relationship between these words. The result is that language seems to disrupt itself, since evidence of Cage's subtractive principle is visible only through its absence. Although this subtractive principle is necessarily dependent on Cage's personal decisions, since it is present only through its absence(s) in the text, it allows Cage to be active, but in a passive manner: Cage does not add anything to the text; he only subtracts from it. In this sense, Cage's silence manages to take on an active, shaping role, as opposed to the passive role readers often view Cage as holding.

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Another disruptive tool in "Writing…" is the repetition of certain words. Repetitions usually strengthen meanings in texts, since they build on the previous appearance of the word or image and then add onto it; they create layers of meaning. However, in "Writing…," repetition does not create layers of meaning, because the text remains flat; since all words in the text are essentially equal in value—since the form calls their signification into question equally—the repetition of a word does not add layers. In fact, repetition points out the absence of layers, since we as readers expect them to appear when repetition occurs.

Moreover, the lack of meaning in the text means that each repetition actually decreases any possible certainty in a word's meaning inside the text. Without meticulously going back and searching out each occurrence of a particular word, "Writing..." leaves the reader with only a vague recollection of the previous appearance(s) of the word (there are no semantic devices, such as narrative, to provide a mnemonic tag to each word). Consequently, when a word does reappear, it brings with it as a trace the previous occurrence's(s') lack of meaning. In this manner, repeated words actually hold less meaning in the text than those that occur only once.[50]

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Wednesday, May 5, 2004

There seems to be a certain sympathy between "Writing…" and sound poetry. Sound poems, according to Stephen Scobie, "are difficult to describe and account for in the normal language of literary criticism – and this is of course part of their intention. The 'contents' of the sound poem are, and always have been, more emotional than intellectual, more visceral than mental. [Steve McCaffery, in 'For a poetry of blood,' states that] 'Sound poetry is the poetry of direct emotional confrontation: there is no pausing for intellectualization'" (216). Sound poetry generally avoids using complete words, but this is not always the case. A good definition of sound poetry is that the poem gives priority to the sound, rather than the signification, of the letters, phonemes, or words; as such, the text uses words merely for sound purposes, as the sound poem removes the signifier from the signified through chant, repetition, disjunction, parataxis, etc. "Writing…" works in much the same way. Although the text uses mostly words, and often even phrases or complete sentences appear, the primary concern of these units is their sound, not their meaning. In a passage such as

aux Jours
des bAtailles
blottoM
warE
trifid tongueS you daredevil Donnelly

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[50] Communication theory disagrees with my choice of words here. According to communication theory, the more possible meanings a word contains, the more meaning it contains; in our day to day use of transparent language, consequently, we try to use words with as little meaning as possible. I am using the term *meaning* in a subjective sense; to the reader, if a word has a near infinite number of possible meanings, that word is meaningless in practical terms, since it cannot be made to mean anything in particular.

hooJahs
kOojahs up
his fånden's catachYsm
Caiuscounting
in the scalE of pin puff pive puff piff piff puff pive

par Jure
you plAit nuncandtunc and
Mams
spottpricE
twaS he was ("Writing..."160)

it is the sound of the words, not their meanings, that is most important to the experience of the text. The use of French, untranslated and disconnected, nonce words (*blottom, hoojahs, koojahs*) compound words (*spottprice* and *caiuscounting*), and pure sounds words (the onomatopoeia of "pin puff pive puff piff piff puff pive") all signal that the passage is important in terms of its sounds. In fact, I doubt that a reasonable reading in terms of the words' semantic meaning could really be offered. Moreover, Cage used "Writing..." as the basis for the piece *Roaratorio*, a radio experiment that uses sounds layered over each other, while Cage reads "Writing...," in order to create a sound collage that blurs the distinctions between Cage's musical and literary works. Considering that so much of the text of "Writing..." cannot be made out during the performance of *Roaratorio*, it seems possible that the best way to engage with "Writing..." is as though it were a piece of instrumental music written with words.

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Friday, April 30, 2004

Ron Silliman proposes the new sentence, a sentence that limits the syllogistic movement in language toward higher, transcendent meaning in the reader's mind (syllogistic: of the syllogism; "An argument expressed or claimed to be expressible in the form of two propositions called the premisses [sic], containing a common or middle term, with a third proposition called the conclusion, resulting necessarily from the other two" (*Oxford English Dictionary*); Silliman's notion of a new sentence text is a text of combinatory movements, where sentences build in the reader's mind until they provide a synergistic whole, greater than the total of its parts. In this case, the synergistic product is the emotional impact on the reader; Silliman argues that "Sentences are not emotional but paragraphs are" (86). This new sentence, which resembles in many ways a string of non sequiturs, attempts to focus the reader's attention at the level of the materiality of language: "The limiting of syllogistic movement keeps the reader's attention at or very close to the level of language, that is, most often at the sentence level or below" (91). Moreover, in the new sentence, "individual sentences are *not* in 'free-standing isolation'.... [A]ny attempt to explicate the work as a whole according to some 'higher order' of meaning, such as narrative or character, is doomed to sophistry, if not overt incoherence. The new sentence is a decidedly contextual object" (92).

The idea that the frustration of the movement towards transcendent meaning provokes an attentiveness in the reader to the material nature of language is an idea that Cage firmly believed in (though he did not have the theoretical lexicon to express it exactly in these terms). However, Silliman champions the sentence, an element of grammar, whereas Cage believed that the sentence was another artificial construct intended to order our thoughts in a certain regimented fashion. Does this mean that Cage's earlier proposition failed, or that his challenges to ordered language were scaled back in the new sentence era of Language poetry?

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Silliman, a confirmed Marxist (and there are fundamental oppositions between Marxism and anarchy that should not be overlooked), states that "The poet who writes with the idea of having her poems published, of having them collected into books and distributed through stores and direct mail purchases (which may at this point be the larger sector of the market), has inescapably been drawn into the creation of commodities" (21). Publishing a book of poetry within the capitalist system provides fuel (however small) for that system.

There can be no doubt that Cage did not approve of capitalism; however, Cage was himself a major engine driving capitalism within the arts scene—he published dozens of books, gave lectures at many of the most prestigious universities, seminars, and festivals in the world, and wrote music that performers are still recording and selling today. Moreover, his books were published by some of the largest, most important publishers working in the field of academic literature: U of Chicago P, Wesleyan UP, Harvard UP, and Cambridge UP. This institutional backing provided Cage with a great deal of cultural capital, which ensured that his ideas would be read, reviewed, and discussed. What does it do to Cage's critiques of capitalism, democracy, consumerism, etc., when it becomes obvious that Cage himself not only benefited from these capitalistic aspects of society, but (perhaps unwittingly) supported them by lending his name, his ideas, and his beliefs to the system? Are Cage and his project necessarily compromised?

Yes and no. Of course Cage was compromised; we all are (unless the person reading this grows his/her own food, generates his/her own electricity, does not drive a car, and gains material goods only through a barter system). Capitalism overwhelms all who live within it, including those who attempt to critique or change it. Complicity is the normal state of affairs for all marginal positions. However, is it really such a one-way street as that? Baudrillard believes so, as do other theorists; to them, the only true opposition is silence, since that is the only opposition that cannot be recuperated. But what about a theorist such as Lyotard, who celebrates dissensus? Is that notion of rampant pluralism, where there are too many positions for there to be a stable "mainstream," not in itself a challenge to reified positions of power? Couldn't we see Cage using his cultural capital as a weapon to force power-positions to sow the seeds of criticism against themselves? According to this logic, recuperation is not a one-way street; yes, the power -positions recuperate Cage's criticisms, because those criticisms are complicit with the power-positions (through a dependence on their publishing houses); however, at the same time, Cage's criticisms also recuperate and incorporate the power-positions, since the power-positions necessarily grant approval of the marginalized positions he offers. Of course, one could view this recuperation within the lens of the carnivalesque and suggest that power-positions merely allow enough freedom and criticism in order to defuse any truly dangerous challenges to the system.

But, in the end, given the choice between silence and speech, I prefer to grant speech some power. Otherwise, I would have to dismiss Cage's project (along with the projects of the historical avant-garde, surrealism, dadaism, etc.); the fundamental problem with Baudrillard's view is that it dismisses projects such as Cage's as always already compromised, and so the only positive challenge is the silent, nonchalant shrug of disinterestedness.

Judging what we know of Cage, it seems only fair to suggest that if another medium were available to him at the time, a medium that avoided the power politics of the publishing house, he would likely have taken it. Considering his interest in computers, it seems likely that, if he were working today, he would be exploring the options of distribution through the internet, providing free downloads of material to all who were interested. This is merely conjecture on my part, of course, but the anarchic elements of the world wide web would surely have piqued Cage's interest. In the end, it seems unfair to critique Cage's project as complicit, seeing as how there was hardly any other option available to someone who wanted to spread his message.

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Monday, May 3, 2004

It must be obvious by now (or it will become obvious, depending on where this section appears in this chapter) that this chapter isn't really about providing a reading of Cage's "Writing For the Second Time Through *Finnegans Wake*," given that I've hardly quoted from that text at all, and given that most of my discussions have dealt with ideas that are somewhat tangential to the text itself. This chapter is a poorly wrought urn, indeed, but I make no apologies to Cleanth Brooks, primarily because I'm not sure that this urn wasn't intended as an ashtray after all (or is it more of a birdhouse? perhaps it's a lopsided planting pot?). There is, of course, a method to my madness; I am specifically avoiding providing a reading of "Writing…" because I don't think such a reading would be the most appropriate way of reading "Writing…" In fact, I think that such a reading would necessarily contradict much of what "Writing…" tries to accomplish. Allow me to elucidate.

Cage, in his "DIARY: HOW TO IMPROVE THE WORLD (YOU WILL

ONLY MAKE MATTERS WORSE) 1965" states that

> **Where there's a history of**
> **organization (art), introduce disorder.**
> **Where there's a history of**
> **disorganization (world society),**
> **introduce order. These directives are**
> **no more opposed to one another than**
> **mountan's [sic] opposed to spring**
> **weather. "How can you believe this when**
> **you believe that?" How can I not?** (19-20)

Critics generally would probably agree that art is organized, but rarely do they bring disorder. Generally, critics introduce order into a system that is already ordered; they often provide answers for texts, which brings in the ultimate order: reification. Of course, Cage saw himself introducing disorder into the ordered art world, and, consequently, a case could be made for introducing order into his work through criticism. I certainly don't mean to say that this approach is wrong, but it is limiting. Perhaps this limiting is necessary for understanding—but people accept the notion of *understanding art* too often as a natural course of affairs. This chapter (and this whole dissertation) offers a different academic path; the fundamental notion that I am following is a feeling that, following Cage's notion of disorder/anarchy/unimpededness/interpenetration/etc., there is a way to deal with texts like "Writing…" that allows for knowing without understanding. In this sense, knowing involves an experiential encounter with as many possible meanings of the text as possible, whereas understanding too often means finding as few overarching meanings or interpretations as possible and claiming they are the only reasonable meanings or interpretations for the text.

Cage used chance operations in texts such as "Writing…" in order to highlight the abundance of choice that operates in the world. As he argued, "chance operations are not mysterious sources of 'the right answers.' They are a means of locating a single one among a multiplicity of answers, and, at the same time, of freeing the ego of its taste and memory, its concern for profit and power, of silencing the ego so that the rest of the world has a chance to enter into the ego's own experience whether that lie outside or inside" ("Preface to 'Lecture on the Weather'" 5). I would argue that a close reading of a text such as "Writing…" limits choice, as the reader denies some possible meanings in order to determine *the* proper meaning. In this sense, conventional criticism works to place a text such as "Writing…" back inside the framework of profit and power that Cage attempted (perhaps naively) to avoid.

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Of course, the problem with writing about "Writing…" is that there is no way to completely avoid being an agent of power and profit while one does it; merely by writing about "Writing…," I argue that it is a text that deserves serious academic study. While the method I'm using attempts to diminish as much as possible this recuperative pull of academia, "Writing…" becomes incorporated into the intellectual culture when academics write about it in any way. Silence, as Cage himself believed, is the only way to completely avoid this recuperation; but, and here's the rub, silence also means that fewer and fewer people will be aware of the text's existence. This is where the notion of interpenetration can help to alleviate a lopsided, top-down notion of recuperation: if writing about "Writing…" in many ways tempers the critiques the text offers, writing about the text also ensures that those tempered critiques reach a wider audience, an audience that will hopefully take up in their own work the critiques and challenges Cage offers. The gamble is that academic writing will introduce Cage's work to enough interested people to counter-balance the recuperative pull of academic writing, that "Writing…" can work to change the system from within, without being corrupted by that system.

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Again, Cage's belief in the importance of a multiplicity of possible readings is a belief that Language writing has supported and carried on. Steve McCaffery, for one, draws a distinct relationship between the lack of a transcendent, monological meaning in the text and the lack of an author position behind or above the text:

> Language writing resists reduction to a monological message, offering

> instead an organized surface of signifiers whose signifieds are undetermined. There is a primacy lent to readership as a productive engagement with a text in order to generate local pockets of meaning as semantic eruptions or events that do not accumulate into aggregated masses. The texts, whilst written, demand writers to produce *from* them, for what the texts deliberately lack are *authors*: the traditional literary fiction of a central detached but recoverable source of origin. ("Language Writing" 149)

Cage's use of chance operations, which attempts to diminish the ego, is also an early attack on the author position. "Writing…," for example, denies Cage the privilege of being the author, since he did not write the words contained in the text (Joyce, after all, wrote—and often created—the words that appear). At the same time, "Writing…" would not exist without Cage; the paradox is that Cage both is and is not the author of "Writing…" because the text does not contain an author position that is transcendent to the text. Cage merely created the text; he did not write it. This lack of a transcendent author position is what allows the reader to take an active role in the creation of the text's meaning when she reads "Writing…"; since the author position is absent, the reader is able to assume the creative role that the text usually allows only to the author. As such, each individual reader actually creates an individual, unique text each time he reads "Writing…."

One could argue, of course, that readers of readerly texts also create unique texts each time they encounter a readerly text. This is undeniable. The difference here is a matter of degrees; while different people (including the same person at different times) can read a readerly text differently, these different readings will still agree on the fundamentals of the text: the story, the setting, the beginning, the ending, etc. However, readers engaging with a radically writerly text will likely not agree on these fundamentals, since the text itself in no way dictates what the fundamentals are. In "Writing…," for example, there is no plot, but more importantly there is no firm signification; the words are not defined by the text, but by the reader(s).

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Monday, April 19, 2004

Joyce seemed to me to have kept the old structures ("sintalks") in which he put the new words he had made….

And a further omission was suggested by Norman O. Brown, that of punctuation, a suggestion I quickly acted on. Subsequently, the omitted marks were kept, not in the mesostics but on the pages where they originally appeared, the marks disposed in the space and those other than periods given an orientation by means of *I Ching* change operations. Where, in all this work, Joyce used italics, so have I. My marginal figures are source pages of the Viking Press edition of *Finnegan.* ("Writing…" 133, 135).

In such a case my work was merely to show, by giving it a five-line structure, the relation of Joyce's text to his name, a relationship that was surely in these instances not in his mind, though at many points, as Adaline Glasheen cheerfully lists, his name was in his mind, alone or in combination with another name, for example, 'poorjoist' (page 113), and "joysis crisis" (page 395).

When I was composing my *Sonatas and Interludes*, which I did at the piano, friends used to want to know what familiar tunes, *God Save the King*, for instance, would sound like due to the preparations between the strings. I found their curiosity offensive, and similarly from time to time in the course of this work I've had my doubts about the validity of finding in *Finnegans Wake* these mesostics on his name which James Joyce didn't put there. However I just went straight on, A after J, E after M, J after S, Y after O, E after C. I read each passage at least three times and once or twice upside down. (Hazel Dreis, who taught us English binding, used to tell us how she proofread the *Leaves of Grass*, an edition of which she bound for San Francisco's Grabhorn Press: upside down and backwards. When you don't know what you're doing, you do

> your work very well.) J's can thus be spotted by their dots and by their dipping below the line which i's don't do. Difficult letters to catch are the commonest ones, the vowels. And the consonants escape our notice in empty words, words the mind skips over. I am native to detailed attention, though I often make mistakes: I was born in September. But I found myself from time to time bursting into laughter (this, not when the *Wake* was upside down). The play of sex and church and food and drink in an all time space world turned family was not only regaling: it Joyced me (in places, that is, where Thoreau hadn't, couldn't, where, left to myself, I wouldn't've). I don't know whom to connect with Joyce ("We connect Satie with Thoreau"). Duchamp stands, I'd say, somewhere between. He is, like Joyce, alone. They are connected. For that and many other reasons. But that's something else to do. ("Writing…" 136)

These quotations from Cage's introduction to "Writing for the Second Time through *Finnegans Wake*," though admittedly long for quotations, sum up a great deal of Cage's aesthetics in a rather short space, such as:

- Cage's emphasis on dialogic and synchronic cooperation. There is an emphasis that the idea for removing the punctuation came from Brown, as well as an emphasis on the cooperative/dialogic relationship between Duchamp and Joyce, Satie and Thoreau. He stresses the rather passive, receptive role he played in the creation of "Writing…," putting an emphasis on Joyce as the active partner. Much like nature, Cage abhors the idea of an artist in a vacuum. This emphasis on contextualization comes from Cage's belief in political anarchy.
- an emphasis on change and correction. Though Cage places himself in the passive role in relation to Joyce, he openly points to the corrections (removal of syntax) that he brings to the project. This is stated, though, in such a way as to push Joyce's experiments along, to keep the challenges that Joyce offered in *Finnegans Wake* moving forward (so, really, the term "correction," which implies a bettering, is inappropriate for Cage's aesthetics; instead, the term "furthering," which does not imply a mistake on Joyce's part, should be used).

This sense of a creative continuum implies that Cage's text should by no means be seen as an ending, but merely another momentary stop in a grand transhistorical series of experiments. Cage implicitly points towards further experiments by others in the future.

- the use of the *I Ching* brings in Cage's desire to lessen the role of the artist's personal ego in the creative act. This, of course, helps to allow Cage to receive Joyce's and others' lessons and to put them into practice, but it also denies the Romantic myth of the artist. Cage's use of chance methods consequently prods future experiments by other artists, as his text is, in many ways, not his. Chance methods open up this distance between Cage and his works.
- an emphasis on attention, which could also be referred to as listening, or receiving. Through the attention to the smallest details—through Cage's proofreading of Joyce—Cage creates in himself a heightened state of awareness. This heightened state opens the door to the Zen awareness of unimpededness and interpenetration, which, in turn, are closely related to anarchistic cooperation.
- an open acknowledgement of the experimental nature of the project. Cage, through the different rules he sets himself in the creation of the text, not only downplays his personal, artistic ego; he also places the importance of the project on the creative process, and it is this process, not the finished product, that engages with anarchistic cooperation and Zen attention.
- Cage's dissatisfaction with his friends who treat his creative process as a mere game (those asking to hear different tunes on his prepared piano) points towards Cage's desire for the audience to actively achieve the state of attention when they read or listen to one of his works. In the case of "Writing…," Cage's desire is not to create a text for people to passively enjoy, but, like himself during the process of creation, the audience should actively engage in the creation of the text as a member in the cooperative process. This engagement with attention, which opens the channels to cooperation, unimpededness, and interpenetration, is the reason Cage produces the text in the first place. In this sense, the

educational aspect of Cage's project becomes clear. This educational streak in Cage's project ties him with the modernists, as David W. Bernstein argues.

- the importance of making something strange, similar to Viktor Shklovsky's notion of *ostranie*, is intricately a part of Cage's emphasis on attention.[51] The use of punctuation, for example, as a decorative element on the page, rather than as a prescriptive grammatical tool, is a good example of this making strange, as is the emphasis Cage places on paying attention to the elements of language (vowels, empty words) that readers often take for granted or natural.

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[51] Fred Wah states

> This notion of "making strange" is an old one but it has gained currency recently via the oft-quoted 1917 statement by the Russian formalist critic Viktor Shklovsky:
>
> > And art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stony. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects "unfamiliar," to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object; the object is not important (12).
> > ("Strang(l)ed Poetics" 24)

Chapter Four

Momentous Inconclusions: Robert Duncan's *Passages*

Monday, May 17, 2004

"Tribal Memories, *Passages* 1" introduces several major themes that will appear at different points in the sequence. To begin with, there is Duncan's use of borrowing; in this case, a borrowing to begin the project:

> from the Emperor Julian, *Hymn to the Mother of the Gods:*
> *And Attis encircles the heavens like a tiara, and thence*
> *sets out as though to descend to earth.*
>
> •
>
> *For the even is bounded, but the uneven is without bounds*
> *and there is no way through or out of it.* [52]

It is important that Duncan highlight his act of poetic borrowing to the reader. This borrowing, while part of the *Passages* sequence, also stands outside of *Passages*; it appears on the top of the page, before the first *Passages* poem begins. The borrowing, then, is both a part of Duncan's writing and not a part of Duncan's writing, and it is both a part of the *Passages* sequence and not a part of the sequence. These six lines[53] call into question the notion of discrete authorship, as well as the notion of discrete writings (in this case, the notion of separate(d) poems); most importantly, these lines accomplish a distrust and denial of any fixed boundaries. Duncan, as an anarchist, refuses to accept that any individual is ever truly separate from the group. This notion applies to Duncan himself, since he is an openly derivative poet; it also applies to his writings in at least two important ways; firstly, his writings connect diachronically to the great body of humanity's literature (including literature from the past as well as literature that will be written in the future), as well as synchronically to all of his own writings. As Duncan states in *Ground Work*,

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[52] For brevity, Duncan's work will be abbreviated in citations in the following way: *BB* for *Bending the Bow*; *GW* for *Ground Work*; *GWII* for *Ground Work II*. This quotation, from *Bending the Bow*, would be cited (*BB* 9).

[53] I include the "•" as a line, not merely as a symbol that is outside the actual text of the poem, since the rest of the sequence uses that symbol as an integral part of the text.

> In *Passages* verses may be articulated into phrases or tesserae of utterances and silences leading to a series of possible sentences. As *Passages* themselves are but passages of a poem beyond that calls itself *Passages* and that is manifest only in the course of the books in which it appears, even so phrases have both their own meaning and yet belong to the unfolding revelations of a Sentence beyond the work. (n. pag.)

In this sense, one could argue that it is unfair to atomize Duncan's work, in the way that I am, by looking at only particular poems and treating them as though they did not necessarily intertwine with the rest of his body of work; this critique is valid, but only to a point: since Duncan sees his work (and all other writers' works as well) as part of a great tapestry, it is necessary fix a boundary at some point, or else we are left with the unfeasible option that Duncan's poetry must be studied in relation to all of the world's literature. Furthermore, if we look at Duncan's poetry in the terms that he himself often uses, we can argue that each poem is both separate as well as interconnected; each poem, though connected in some fashion with Literature on a grand scale, is also an individual instance of what language can provide at one place and moment.

More precisely, the six lines that introduce *Passages* also introduce several key topics for Duncan. Most obviously, there is the mystical element, through the reference to the Mother of the Gods and to Attis. In particular, Attis is a figure who joins together heaven and earth; he is a link between the noumenal and the phenomenal, the mystical and the mundane. As such, he is a figure who holds the same place in Duncan's world view as the poet, who also links these two states of being: in the poem that directly follows this opening, the poet is able to connect with Mnemosyne, the goddess also known as "Her-Without-Bounds," who appears in each manifestation of humanity, but the poet in Duncan's opinion is never set outside of humanity because of this connection to the divine; instead, he sees the poet as a central member of the community, a connected part of the society in which the poet lives:

> For this is the company of the living
> and the poet's voice speaks from no
>   crevice in the ground between

mid-earth and underworld
breathing fumes of what is deadly to know,
news larvae in tombs,
and twists of time do feed upon,

but from the hearth stone, the lamp light,
the heart of the matter where the
house is held (*BB* 9)

The poet, though connected to the divine, is not otherworldly (as was the ghost of Tiresias in *The Iliad*, for example); instead, the poet is merely a person who has managed to expand his connections beyond the physical plane of existence, and so is a gateway figure connecting two worlds.

Finally, Duncan's choice of material lends one final insight into his aesthetics. The inclusion of Attis as the gateway figure is particularly important. Attis was "a god of vegetation, similar to Tammuz and Adonis. Imported together with his mother Cybele from Persia. Driven mad by the deranged love of his mother, Attis castrated himself under a pine tree. Attis' priests were eunichs" (http://members.aol.com/PgnEyez/Gods1.html). While it might be overstating things to suggest that the choice of Attis was Duncan's way of harkening back to a homosexual mythological figure, it seems likely that Duncan was aware that there are homosexual undercurrents in Attis's story. Duncan's figure for the poet is one who is driven mad by the love of a woman; moreover, Attis, in an attempt to escape this love, castrates himself, thus negating the possibility of engaging in heterosexual intercourse. As I said, this doesn't necessarily imply that Attis is a homosexual figure, but it does necessarily imply that he is not a fully-functioning heterosexual. Perhaps Attis should be seen as a figure who is neither one nor the other, neither straight nor gay, and, as such, is a figure who allows for the possibility of both homosexuality and/or heterosexuality.

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Tuesday, May 18, 2004

A *Passage*. A passageway. A link between two places that would otherwise remain separate. Time passes. Excerpts from a larger work. Duncan states that

> The poem is not a stream of consciousness, but an area of composition in which I work with whatever comes into it. Only words come into it. Sounds and ideas. The tone leading of vowels, the various percussions of consonants. The play of numbers in stresses and syllables. In which meanings and ideas, themes and things seen, arise. So that there is not only a melody of sounds but of images. Rimes, the reiteration of formations in the design, even puns, lead into complexities of the field. But now the poet works with a sense of parts fitting in relation to parts of a great story that he knows will never be completed. A word has the weight of an actual stone in his hand. The tone of a vowel has the color of a wing. "Don't mess up the perception of one sense by trying to define it in terms of another," Pound warnd [sic]. But we reflect that the ear is the organ not only of hearing but of our equilibrations. (*BB* vi)

The passages are areas of composition where Duncan works with whatever passes into it, whatever passages present themselves. Duncan is quite explicit that all of these things that enter the passage are *words*, and that these words are physical things to him. In this sense, language is both a barrier separating the poet from what we usually call the *real* world, the world of physical things, and, at the same time, language is the *real* world, the only world that the poet can work with. Language, then, is a physical reality of its own; more importantly, like the poems it comprises, language is the thing that the poet passes through in order to establish contact with other things in the world. Language is a site of mediation for Duncan, a place where the world exists and means.

Or perhaps more correctly, for Duncan language, like all things in the world, is a site where a person can experience the creative essence of existence. For this reason, Duncan sees his work with words as a mystical process:

> *It* is striving to come into existence in these things, or, all striving to come into existence is It – in this realm of men's languages a poetry of all poetries, grand collage, I name It, having only the immediate event of

> words to speak for It. In the room we, aware or unaware, are the event of ourselves in It. The Gnostics and magicians claim to know or would know Its real nature, which they believe to be miswritten or cryptically written in the text of the actual world. But Williams is right in his *no ideas but in things*; for It has only the actual universe in which to realize Itself. We ourselves in our actuality, as the poem in its actuality, its thingness, are facts, factors, in which It makes Itself real. Having only these actual words, these actual imaginations that come to us as we work. (*BB* vii)

For Duncan, then, all people and all actions are part of this grand collage, which itself is merely the collection of all people, things, and actions. Consequently, Duncan's work is part of the grand collage, but he does not consider his work to be any more or less important, any more or less part of the grand collage, than any other person's work. For Duncan, writing is the way that he has found to best personally connect with *It*, the grand collage.

The anarchistic elements of this grand collage are obvious. Like Cage, though, Duncan combines his anarchy with eastern mysticism. Compare, for example, Duncan's description of *It* with the *Tao Te Ching*'s description of the *tao*, or the way:

> The way that can be spoken of
> Is not the constant way;
> The name that can be named
> Is not the constant name.
> The nameless was the beginning of heaven and earth;
> The named was the mother of the myriad creatures.
> Hence always rid yourselves of desires in order to observe its secrets;
> But always allow yourself to have desires in order to observe its manifestations.
> These two are the same
> But diverge in name as they issue forth.
> Being the same they are called mysteries,

Mystery upon mystery –
The gateway of the manifold secrets. (Lao Tzu 57)

Both of these quotations place an emphasis on action and experience and a dismissal of definition. The universe explains itself in every element that it contains; every element is a possible experience of the universe, if the witness is willing to connect with the element.

The result of this view of the universe is that the poet is not a creator, but a combiner. All elements already exist; it is only the different combinations, the different uses for these elements, that is available to us. And so we see in "At the Loom," *Passages* 2, that Duncan speaks of his writing as a matter of combining:

my mind a shuttle among
set strings of the music
lets a weft of dream grow in the day time,
an increment of associations,
luminous soft threads,
the thrown glamour, crossing and recrossing,
the twisted sinews underlying the work. (*BB* 11)

This combining is also a matter of connecting with It, with the primary elements of creation. As a result, these combinations (in Duncan's case, the poems he writes) are mystical things; as he declares a few lines after the above, "The secret! the secret! It's hid / in its showing forth" (*BB* 11). I would interpret these lines as a declaration that the weaving that Duncan offers us to read both exposes and hides its act of creation and the elements of all creation; it is up to the reader to decide what to look for in this weave, and to decide how much to engage with the act of weaving itself. After all, Duncan claims his own role as that of a reader, since "At the Loom" begins with Duncan reading Pound:

A cat's purr
in the hwirr thkk "thgk, thkk"
of Kirke's loom on Pound's Cantos
"*I heard a song of that kind...*" (*BB* 11)

Duncan's weaving, then, is a weaving of what he reads in Pound; the act of reading is an active, combinatory engagement with the text. Moreover, it is the act of reading that prompts Duncan's act of writing; in this sense, the passage in *Passages* 2 is from reader to writer, from receiver to transmitter, and it is Pound's text that passes from Duncan to the reader. The *Cantos*, of course, are one of the great combinatory texts, and the reader should note that Pound's role in the *Cantos* was also that of a reader passing on stories from earlier texts; as such, *Passages* 2 invokes Pound's *Cantos* in a way similar to how *Passages* 1 invokes Mnemosyne. The first two *Passages* offer another blending or combination: the Muse that Duncan invokes at the beginning of his sequence is a mixture of the divine and of the poetic canon, of the gods and of human predecessors.

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Wednesday, May 19, 2004

As a sequence of poems written over decades, *Passages* marks, in a way that the other three texts I've dealt with so far don't, the passage of time. Consequently, *Passages* is an oddly personal poem for Duncan, in a way that the other texts aren't, since the pieces of *Passages* bear witness to Duncan's interests, frustrations, inspirations, fears, desires—in short, his life—as they change over time, in a way very similar to diary entries.[54] Duncan, as the speaking *I*, is a constant presence in his sequence in a way that McCaffery, Mullen, Moure, Cage, and even Wah aren't.

Moreover, there is a trust in language in *Passages* that is missing in the other texts. For Duncan, language is a tool of communication, and it is a tool that he trusts. For that reason, *Passages* takes signification as a granted. The only major exception to this statement takes place in "The Fire *Passages* 13." This poem begins and ends with a block of dislocated words, words that exist outside of syntax, and, consequently, outside of the everyday usage of language as a tool of communication. However, even here, the text does not call signification into question, since each word signifies its meaning perfectly well; the only challenge offered to language here is the challenge to syntax, to the combinatory nature of language. At the same time, the reader can still string these words together, as though they are linguistic film cells; by moving from the single image/meaning of each word to the next, the reader can combine these words together in a herky-jerky way in order to bring about a larger meaning (the image of a flip-cartoon, where flipping the pages quickly makes the static images "move," is similar to what I mean by *combining* these static, dislocated words).

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[54] Fred Wah's "Music at the Heart of Thinking" sequence, of course, also records the passage of time; however, Wah's text seems less personal to me than Duncan's. Wah, by remaining somewhat detached from his sequence, places the focus away from himself and onto language—or so it seems to me.

Fundamentally, what I mean to suggest here is that Duncan supports language's transcendent function, a function that the other writers I am dealing with constantly and often explicitly work to diminish or even deny. Can there be any true indeterminacy in a text that believes in a transcendent function in language? I believe that there can be, and that indeterminacy is still a part of the structure of *Passages*; in specific, Duncan introduces indeterminacy into *Passages* through his use of the diachronic sequence, which I see Duncan using in a way similar to a less sophisticated forerunner of what Ron Silliman terms "the new sentence." According to Silliman, there are eight qualities of the new sentence:

> 1) The paragraph organizes the sentence;
> 2) The paragraph is a unit of quantity, not logic or argument;
> 3) Sentence length is a unit of measure;
> 4) Sentence structure is altered for torque, or increased polysemy/ambiguity;
> 5) Syllogistic is: a) limited; b) controlled;
> 6) Primary syllogistic movement is between the preceding and following sentences;
> 7) Secondary syllogistic movement is toward the paragraph as a whole, or the total work;
> 8) The limiting of syllogistic movement keeps the reader's attention at or very close to the level of language, that is, most often at the sentence level or below. (91)

What Duncan does in *Passages* is to use similar strategies, but at different levels. For example, I would say that in *Passages* the individual poem organizes the verse, and that each poem is both a measure of time (quantity) as well as logic and argument. Duncan is not operating at the level of the sentence, but at the level of the poem, and each poem in the sequence operates in a way similar to Silliman's new sentence. In *Passages*, the primary syllogistic movement is from one poem to the passage immediately preceding and succeeding it, while the secondary syllogistic movement is towards the entire *Passages* sequence. In this sense, *Passages* as a whole is amorphous and exists outside of any totalizing definition in the reader's mind, because the syllogistic movement keeps the reader's attention on the individual poem. The result is that indeterminacy enters *Passages* at the macro-level, at the sequence level, as opposed to McCaffery's *Carnival*, for example, which introduces indeterminacy at the level of language itself. It is possible to claim that each individual poem in *Passages* is rather determined, but the sequence, the collage that these poems combine to create, is indeterminate because the connections between the poems are unknowable. As Silliman states for the new sentence, "any attempt to explicate the work as a whole according to some 'higher order' of meaning, such as narrative or character, is doomed to sophistry, if not overt incoherence. The new sentence is a decidedly contextual object" (92). In a similar way, each poem in the *Passages* sequence is a contextual object.[55]

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However, while the sequence form does diminish the success of any attempt to derive an overall meaning for *Passages*, I think that it would be going too far to suggest that it is impossible to shape an overall meaning. The reader must use a different lens through which to see the sequence—in this case, the lens is that of Robert Duncan, subject. By this, I mean that *Passages* has a subject (in all meanings of the term), and that subject is Duncan's life. The diary aspect of the sequence does allow for the construction of a metanarrative based on Duncan's life-narrative, which exists behind each of the poems in the sequence. While it is impossible to say that *Passages* is about anything in the normal use of the phrase, (there are sub-sections that could be suggested, such as the sub-sections on the Vietnam War, or the pains of aging, etc., but these subsections are each obviously inadequate in terms of arguing that the sequence is *about* any one of these topics), on another level *Passages* is a transcription of Duncan's feelings, thoughts, beliefs, and even his goings on. Because of this biographical element, *Passages* does not completely avoid the construction of a metanarrative: it is always possible to view the sequence through the lens of Duncan's life. At the same time, *Passages* reaffirms Duncan's subjectivity, while Duncan's subjectivity informs *Passages*' meta/narrative form. However, Duncan's practice of explicitly borrowing large sections of other texts and placing them in poems throughout the sequence works against this metanarrative subjectivity by blurring the normally fixed subject boundaries given to authors. In this sense, Duncan, like Cage, is an author moving away from the certainties of Modernism and towards the questions and challenges offered by Postmodern poets—though it must be stressed that neither Cage nor Duncan agrees with the metanarrative of progress that this view suggests; instead, Duncan and Cage are merely points on a continuum, a continuum which does not argue that those points on either side (predecessors and successors) of them are more or less correct or advanced than the other. In terms of Duncan and Cage's position, I would say that poetry took a path (a passage?) through them, and was changed through that passage as it is changed through every passage.

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[55] **Friday, April 14, 2005**
Michael O'Driscoll, in a letter to me dated April 13, 2005, comments that

> I think your dissertation quietly finds its grounding in some kind of faith about the integrity or self-sufficiency of the work. This is something that Duncan's serial poem clearly challenges, as does the intertextuality of McCaffery, and I know that you demonstrate this throughout. However, I do see you relying on this faith when you remove RD's "Passages" from the volumes in which they appear and then treat them in a decontextualized, dehistoricized fashion.

There is no denying the correctness of this comment. My only justification for this decontextualization is that I feel it would be impossible, given the absolutely interconnected nature of Duncan's mature writing, to account for all of the strands of connectedness for much, if any, of his pieces. For this reason, I have artificially chosen *Passages*, rather than, say, *Bending the Bow*, for my object of study because, in my mind, choosing to study *Bending the Bow* (or any other individual book by Duncan) would also entail a similarly artificial decontextualization.

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Thursday, May 20, 2004

Anarchy plays a major role in Duncan's aesthetics, especially in *Passages*. The entire sequence form, which Duncan often refers to as a collage or as a woven tapestry, is a prime example of an anarchic form: each piece is separate but linked, complete in and of itself but also part of larger system—a system, of course, that is organic in its growth and not presided over by strict, regimented rules. In constructing an organic system, Duncan follows one of the primary doctrines of anarchy; as Mikhail Bakunin explains, anarchy theory states that natural laws are the only laws that should be acknowledged by individuals and societies: "The liberty of man consists solely in this: that he obeys natural laws because he has *himself* recognized them as such, and not because they have been externally imposed upon him by any extrinsic will whatever, divine or human, collective or individual" ("God and the State" 141).

Moreover, there are instances of anarchic form within many of the individual *Passages* themselves. "The Architecture *Passages* 9" is an excellent example of anarchic form, as Duncan openly borrows from several texts within this poem, taking impetus from a book on architecture and then tying this book and several others with his own thoughts, thus setting his thoughts within a community of equals. He also lists the books on the surrounding shelves, providing a sort of reading list for what inspired and educated him. Furthermore, this list carries with it a very didactic element, as Duncan lists the books in order to educate the reader, to prod the reader to study these "proper" authors and texts. There is a great deal of didacticism in *Passages*, which might seem to contradict Duncan's avowed anarchism. However, Duncan's personal strain of anarchy, which shares a great deal with Bakunin's, is an openly didactic philosophy. There are several reasons for this didacticism: firstly, there is a sense in Duncan that he himself is only part of a bigger system, or, as he puts it in "Where It Appears *Passages* 4,"

Statistically insignificant as a locus of creation
I have in this   my own
intense
area of self creation,
the Sun itself
insignificant among suns. (*BB* 15)

Duncan claims no special insight or knowledge, since he is merely one poet out of hundreds or thousands of others. This refusal to view his own ideas as somehow privileged offers him a platform from which to teach; if his is only one voice in a multitude, it becomes the audience's job to listen to or ignore Duncan's ideas. Since he claims no special place for his writing, he feels free to express his personal ideas and beliefs completely. Working alongside of this refusal of special status is Duncan's omnipresent awareness of his position as an inheritor of a great body of knowledge from the past. Because Duncan is a recipient of others' thoughts and ideas, just as the reader is the recipient of his thoughts, he openly acknowledges his borrowings. This consequently means that Duncan, in many of his didactic moments, is merely passing on the knowledge of others. As he states in "As in the Old Days *Passages* 8,"

the ones of the old days

•

will not be done with us
but come to mind •
thought designing for their sake
chariots and horizons •
from which they come
towards us
ever • (*BB* 24)

Duncan believes himself to be a conduit of knowledge at least as much as he is a provider of knowledge. His position is that of a relayer of information to the reader. Moreover, anarchy maintains a respect for the individual that allows for didacticism; Bakunin argues that

> It is clear that if the people do not develop this ideal [for liberty] from within themselves, no one will be able to give it to them. In general it should be observed that no one, neither an individual, a society, nor a nation, can be given anything that does not already exist within him, not just in embryo but developed to some degree. Let us take the individual. Unless an idea already exists within him as a living instinct and as a more or less clear conception which serves as the initial expression of that instinct, you cannot explain it to him, and more important, you cannot pound it into him. ("Statism and Anarchy" 167)

Consequently, anarchists following this line of logic are free to be as pedantic as they choose, since they believe there is no danger of converting someone's beliefs or thoughts; Duncan is therefore able to be didactic without fear of overly influencing the reader.

Finally, there is a moral didacticism that exists in all strains of anarchy. To believe in the possibility of society existing without external laws governing behaviour is to believe that, somehow, people will be able to control the passions and unwelcome actions of individuals in that society. Usually, anarchists refer to a moral code that the community will be able to enforce through a system based on shaming those who don't uphold the moral majority. For someone like Duncan, then, it is personally acceptable that he include his personal moral code within his poetry, and also offer shame to correct what he sees to be immoral behaviour. Consequently, in "The Fire *Passages* 13," Duncan moves from a discussion of Piero di Cosimo's painting *A Forest Fire* to a discussion of America's and other countries' immoral leaders:

> Satan looks forth from
> men's faces:
> Eisenhower's idiot grin, Nixon's
> black jaw, the sly glare in Goldwater's eye, or
> the look of Stevenson lying in the U.N. that our
> Nation save face •
>
> His face multiplies from the time of Roosevelt, Stalin,
> Churchill, Hitler, Mussolini…. (*BB* 43)

Duncan, in these vehement attacks, implicitly offers a lesson on morality, as he shames those people he views as having acted immorally.

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There are, of course, several problems with Duncan's anarchistic didacticism. Most obviously, the notion that one person cannot sway another through the power of his or her personality, logic, or rhetoric is extremely naïve. To suppose that he can be openly didactic because there is no chance of converting his audience is simply unbelievable.

George Woodcock, himself an avowed anarchist, offers a less obvious, but no less important criticism of anarchistic didacticism: "The anarchists accept much too uncritically the idea of an active public opinion as an easy way out of the problem of dealing with antisocial tendencies. Few of them have given sufficient thought to the danger of a moral tyranny replacing a physical one…" (84). Readers, then, can view the didactic rants that Duncan offers as a form of intimidation that is every bit as limiting of personal freedom as physical intimidation; viewed along these lines, Duncan's critiques are merely a different form of power supporting a different, more insidious set of laws than the power wielded by governments to enforce the laws they impose on individuals.

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Friday, May 21, 2004

One aspect of the style of anarchy that Duncan believes in is an acceptance of the necessity of conflict in order to create something new; this is radically different from Cage, for example, who followed Kropotkin's fundamentally non-violent form of anarchy. As a result, while Cage constantly avoids oppositional politics, as he considered even an ideological conflict unproductive, Duncan openly and repeatedly resorts to verbal conflict in *Passages*. The impetus behind conflict in Duncan parallels Bakunin's thoughts on the essential role of violence in anarchy: "Three elements or, if you like, three fundamental principles constitute the essential conditions of all human development, collective or individual, in history: (1) *human animality*; (2) *thought*; and (3) *rebellion*. To the first property corresponds *social and private economy*; to the second, *science*; to the third, *liberty*" ("God and State" 129). Rebellion, as Bakunin's own life bore witness to, was both necessary and necessarily violent (Bakunin was at the heart of at least five violent uprisings during his life). Bakunin considers this violence justified because he believes the systems of government carry out equally violent acts in order to maintain the status quo. As Bakunin states, "It is the characteristic of privilege and of every privileged position to kill the mind and heart of men. The privileged man, whether politically or economically, is a man depraved in mind and heart. That is a social law which admits of no exceptions…" ("God and the State" 142). Duncan, in his grouping together of political leaders such as Churchill and

Roosevelt with Stalin, Mussolini, and even Hitler (in "The Fire *Passages* 13"), supports this anarchic view that all governments are evil, and that all members of these governments, no matter what side of the political spectrum they are on, are working towards evil.

Carl D. Esbjornson, in his article "Mastering the Rime: Strife in Robert Duncan's Poetry," has several insights into Duncan's use of strife in his poetry. He argues that "In Duncan's mythopoesis, Love (Eros) figures in his sense of the regenerative possibility of language. Yet Love, too, has the power within itself to destroy as well as create. Accordingly, Duncan adopts a Heraclitean creative-destructive mythos in which strife becomes a formative principle…" (74). Esbjornson, however, overlooks the role that anarchy plays in Duncan's aesthetics, which is an important oversight when considering that Esbjornson unwittingly offers strong proof for the central role anarchy plays in shaping Duncan's personal opinions towards violence in his *Passages*; as Esbjornson argues,

> In *Passages* (1968-1984), Duncan stands 'before the war' confronting it and the potential for evil in himself, for, even in Passages 25, "Up Rising," Duncan's moral outrage against the Vietnam War gives way to a more profound realization that he, too, is involved if only because he recognizes the common identity all Americans share. Concerning "Up Rising," Duncan says, "Back of such a sense of moral outrage is the strong sense of belonging to this 'we,' of being American as a condition of being human, so that the crimes of the Nation are properly my own, of having, in other words, a burden of original sin in the history of the Nation." (78)

This inability to distance himself from the violence of his government depends on an anarchistic understanding of community, especially on the moral duties individuals have to influence other members towards just decisions (refer to yesterday's section for the importance of moral pressure in anarchy). Moreover, Esbjornson offers a rather blanket statement, implying that all of the strife in Duncan's work revolves around

Duncan's focus on love, which, according to Esbjornson, "[For Duncan], contains both Eris, its destructiveness, and Eros, its generativeness" (76-7).

There are certainly many moments in *Passages* that conform to this view of Duncan as presenting himself as complicit in America's crimes, as well as the view that Duncan sees destruction as a positive force ("*Passages* 33 Transmissions" and "Empedoklean Reveries (*Passages*)" are both excellent—and extremely beautiful and moving—examples that support Esbjornson's argument). However, there are also moments where Duncan does not adhere to this formulation. For example, in "The Fire *Passages* 13" Duncan does not include himself in the ranks of the guilty, nor does he see the destruction wrought by the political leaders as something that in any way will lead to a positive outcome: "faces of Princes, Popes, Prime Usurers, Presidents, / Gang Leaders of whatever Clubs, Nations, Legions meet / to conspire, to coerce, to cut down" and "They are burning the woods, the brushlands, the / grassy fields razed; their / profitable suburbs spread" (*BB* 44).[56] At the end of this poem, there is a sense that the destructive principle is gaining more and more strength, that what these leaders are carrying out is a destruction that does not lead to creation, but merely to more destruction; hence the fields are cleared, not for working the earth, but for *their* profitable suburbs, which carry the malaise inherent in such non-productive creations. In this sense, what the destruction brings with it in "The Fire" is an anti-creation: the stultifying, non-community and non-communal space of the suburb. Likewise, in "The Multiversity *Passages* 21," Duncan maintains a distinct boundary between the students protesting for free speech and the governmental and bureaucratic officials who destructively deny free speech; in the poem, there is, though, a definite sense that the positive group is being forged and hardened by the destructive actions of the negative group. So, what I would suggest is a modification of Esbjornson's argument. I would say that there needs to be a distinct difference between strife and destruction in Duncan's poetry; strife, which carries with it an element of Love, and the binary of

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[56] It is true that Duncan includes the line "My name is Legion and in every nation I multiply" (44), which could be seen as an admission of his complicity with the evil leaders; however, I think it is equally likely that this line can be read as the voice of the hidden drive behind the evil leaders, and, as such, the personal pronoun does not include the poem's speaker.

Eris/Eros, may in certain cases destroy something, but it destroys in a Heraclitean fashion, in order to bring about a new creation; pure destruction, on the other hand, is an instrument of government and official power, and destroys only in order to remove obstacles that are attempting to prevent it from reproducing and expanding itself. Duncan almost always views strife positively, as an element of change; like Bakunin, he sees moments of destructive (productive) violence as unpleasant but necessary moments that will bring about greater justice/creativity in the end. However, Duncan rarely aligns himself with the elements of pure destruction; in those poems in which he does so, such as "Up Rising," he does so only with the sense that everyone is guilty for the crimes of their government. There is a sense of communal shame that Duncan feels, but, at the same time, his acceptance of guilt also distances him from the governmental leaders, who do not admit their guilt or feel this shame; consequently, Duncan is able to force the evil into the open: "and the very glint of Satan's eyes from the pit of hell of America's unacknowledged, unrepented crimes that I saw in Goldwater's eyes / now shines from the eyes of the President / in the swollen head of the nation" (*BB* 82-3). Finally, Duncan repeatedly argues that the cause of true, unproductive destruction is the governmental and similar systems that attempt to keep people from an anarchic sense of community:

> Where there is no commune,
>   the individual volition has no ground.
> Where there is no individual freedom,   the commune
>   is falsified.
>
> . . . .
>
> There being no common good, no commune,
> no communion, outside of the freedom of
>   individual volition. (*BB* 70 & 73)
>
>
>   There is no
> good a man has in his own things except

it be in the community of every thing;
no nature he has
but in his nature hidden in the heart of the living,
in the great household. (*BB* 79)

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Monday, May 24, 2004

Passages is very much a mystical text; indeed, it's hard to read very far into the sequence without realizing Duncan's mystical fascination. However, I think the mysticism goes beyond merely referring to the ancient Greek gods or their mysteries. For Duncan, there is also a mystical aspect to all life, creation, and matter, and so it is inevitable that any poem—since poetry necessarily must deal with at least one (and often all three) of these topics—contains mystical elements. This is part of what Duncan means when he refers to the grand collage, that woven essence of life to which everything belongs. More specifically, though, Duncan believes that there is a way to engage with the mystical essence of the world, through attention. It is part of Duncan's project in *Passages* to bring to light those aspects of life that people often overlook or take for granted; this is inherently part of Duncan's didacticism, and it often leads to his desire to root out what he sees as injustices so he (and the reader) can scorn them. However, there is a less aggressive side to Duncan's didacticism, a side that revels in locating and praising those things in our lives that we overlook. Often these moments of gentle didacticism occur at night or in the dark in *Passages*, in those moments where the light has lessened or been removed, such as in "Envoy *Passages* 7":

Good Night, at last
the light of the sun is gone
under Earth's rim
and we
can see the dark interstices
Day's lord erases. (*BB* 22)

These connections between things are extremely important to Duncan, and it is important to see how often they occur at night or in darkness, when the sun (Apollo, masculinity, logic) gives way to the moon (Artemis, femininity, emotion). "Chords *Passages* 14" is another good example of this feminine region of mystical perception, as Duncan associates the moon with the fertile egg, and the night becomes the zone of creativity:

> For the Thing we call Moon contains
>   "many mountains, many cities, many houses"
> And Nature, our Mother,
>   hides us, even from ourselves, there;
>   showing only changes of the Moon
>
> . . . .
>
> These are the Names.   Wind Child, *ύπηνεμιον*
>   of our Night Nature
> in the Moon Egg: First-Born, Not-Yet-Born,
>   Born-Where-We-Are (*BB* 46)

This poem is a recasting of the Phanes myth, and combines other protogonos gods and gods driving creation from several ancient religions (Eros and Dionysus, most obviously). Duncan combines the world egg from which Phanes was born with the moon, and places all of this creative principle under the drive of Mother-Nature (*BB* 46-7). However, Duncan blends this feminine creative principle with a male re-creative principle, Zeus: "These things reborn with Zeus,   happening anew. / *'A dazzling light . . aither . . Eros . . Night'*" (*BB* 47). The connection between Phanes and Zeus is well-established within Greek mythology:

> Phanes was the first king of the universe who passed his sceptre of kingship to Nyx, his only child, who in turn gave it to her son Ouranos. It was taken from Ouranos forcibly by his son Kronos, who in turn lost it to Zeus, the final ruler of the universe. It was said that Zeus devoured Phanes whole in order to assume his primal power over all creation and redistribute it among a new generation of gods - the Olympians. (Theoi Project)

I must point out, though, that Duncan changes the relationship between the two gods from a predatory, antagonistic relationship to a rather peaceful, cooperative relationship. In his attempt to show the connections between things, Duncan in this instance downplays the strife between Phanes and Zeus, and also suggests a cooperative relationship between Mother Nature (darkness/night) and Zeus (light/day).

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One of the most indeterminate aspects of *Passages* is due to its sequence format, specifically the open form of the sequence, which allows Duncan to change topics abruptly from one poem to the next. For example, what is the reader to make of the abrupt change from the ecstatic love poetry Duncan offers in the poems numbered in the late teens, exemplified by "The Torso *Passages* 18," with the often angry, damning war poems that follow almost immediately after? This abrupt change in tone and subject matter can strike the reader as an unfathomable paradox: what connection can there be between the description of love and the denunciation of war? However, looked at in a different way, there is no paradox or contradiction between these two topics at all. There is a passage from "The Earth *Passages* 19," the poem that forms a tenuous bridge between the earlier love poems and the war poems that follow, that provides a clue into how these topics fit together; Duncan writes that "We ourselves can know no good apart / from the good of all men" (*BB* 66). It is as though Duncan is turning both his own as well as the reader's gaze away from the personal, the intimate love described in the preceding poems, towards the communal, the societal problems about to be presented in the poems that follow. I think, then, that Duncan takes the link between the personal and the communal as a granted; he states that there can be no security in the one when there is no safety in the other. The result is that the war poems, in which Duncan personally attacks the governments and politicians responsible for the war, are not merely voices for the community or the society; they are an extension of the intimacy Duncan shares with the reader in the love poems. Just as the war poems intrude on the love poems, so does the war intrude on Duncan's personal relationship with his lover. Duncan sees the war as an attack against all the individuals of the world, not just the Vietnamese who are physically suffering from the acts of war.

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Tuesday, May 25, 2004

Duncan's personal response to the war brings with it positives and negatives. Duncan is certainly able to achieve great passion from his personal response, but the poems are also more easily dismissed (by readers, critics, and those critiqued) as overly-emotional rants, as hectoring. However, I would argue that the war poems' greatest strength is how Duncan focuses his personal and emotional involvement in the topic; specifically, Duncan refuses to turn his gaze to the Vietnamese people who are suffering the most from America's actions during the war. This seems like a silly thing to argue, on its surface; after all, shouldn't American readers be forced to confront the harm that their government is committing on people of another country? I would argue no, and I believe that Duncan agrees with this argument.

First off, it seems extremely unlikely that Duncan's avoidance of explicit descriptions of violence was merely because he wasn't aware of them; Viet Nam was, after all, the first TV war. Reports of atrocities, on both sides of the conflict, were well known back in America when Duncan was writing his war *Passages*; indeed, Duncan makes reference to the use of napalm in "Up Rising *Passages* 25," going so far as to describe "the burning of houses and the torture of mothers and fathers and children, / their hair a-flame, screaming in agony…" (*BB* 81), proving that Duncan knew of at least some of the gory specifics of the conflict. Yet even this description is rather muted and detached, a brief, vague image of a horrible incident, from which Duncan quickly turns his gaze back to his attack on the American military complex and the American government. Why, as an openly didactic anti-war poet, didn't Duncan dwell on the atrocities that his government was committing? Wouldn't these be the strongest bits of evidence that the government was corrupt and evil?

By avoiding these specific descriptions, Duncan also avoids any distinct description or connection with the Vietnamese people; indeed, Duncan rarely refers to them at all in any of his war poems. Consequently, Duncan refrains from attempting to forge any emotional connections with the Vietnamese; again, this seems like an odd strategy to take when you are trying to drum up support against the war. However, there are specific dangers to depending on these emotional ties. Saidiya V. Hartman, in her study of violence in the American slave system, points out that anti-slavery writings often resorted to forging emotional connections between the white reader and the black slave. Referring to John Rankin's anti-slavery writings, Hartman explains the importance of the emotional link between reader and the disempowered group:

> The grotesqueries enumerated in documenting the injustice of slavery are intended to shock and to disrupt the comfortable remove of the reader/spectator. By providing the minutest detail of macabre acts of violence, embellished by his own fantasy of slavery's bloodstained gate, Rankin hoped to rouse the sensibility of those indifferent to slavery by exhibiting the suffering of the enslaved and facilitating an identification between those free and those enslaved.... By bringing suffering near, the ties of sentiment are forged.... In this case, pain provides the common language of humanity; it extends humanity to the dispossessed and, in turn, remedies the indifference of the callous. (17-8)

Oddly, though, Duncan refrains from this process of extending humanity to the dispossessed Vietnamese; instead, they remain as the Other, a rather unknowable lack in Duncan's war poems. This lack, however, might be a good thing in the end. In his attempts to emotionally connect with the slaves, Rankin, Hartman explains, goes so far as to "narrate[] an imagined scenario in which he, along with his wife and child, is enslaved" (18); this scenario brings an empathic connection between the writer/reader and the slaves. However, empathy is a dangerous emotion to use. As Hartman explains,

> Properly speaking, empathy is a projection of oneself into another in order to better understand the other or "the projection of one's own personality into an object, with the attribution to the object of one's own emotions." Yet empathy in important respects confounds Rankin's efforts to identify with the enslaved because in making the slave's suffering his own, Rankin begins to feel for himself rather than for those whom this exercise in imagination presumably is designed to reach. (19)

Rankin ends up feeling for himself, not the slaves, and so the slaves become completely inscrutable to the white subject. Hartman goes on:

> Can the white witness of the spectacle of suffering affirm the materiality of the black sentience only by feeling for himself? Does this not only exacerbate the idea that black sentience is inconceivable and unimaginable but, in the very ease of possessing the abased and enslaved body, ultimately elide an understanding and acknowledgement of the slave's pain?... Rankin must supplant the black captive in order to give expression to black suffering, and as a consequence, the dilemma—the denial of black sentience and the obscurity of suffering—is not attenuated but instantiated. The ambivalent character of empathy—more exactly, the repressive effects of empathy—as Jonathan Boyarin notes, can be located in the "obliteration of otherness" or the facile intimacy that enables identification with the other only as we "feel ourselves into those we imagine as ourselves." And as a consequence, empathy fails to expand the space of the other but merely places the self in its stead. (19-20)

Oddly enough, then, by avoiding any description of the Vietnamese in his war poems, Duncan maintains the full depth of their suffering. He refuses to place himself in their place because, quite simply, it is unethical to do so. There is no imagining, for Duncan, what the Vietnamese are enduring; as a result, there is no lessening, no displacing, their pain. In a rather paradoxical way, by avoiding dealing with the victims in his war poems, Duncan precludes the easy, empathic obliteration of otherness that more graphic descriptions (such as those found in newspaper accounts) allow.

Finally, the racial aspect of the Vietnam War should not be forgotten. Duncan is a white American; to try to capture the sufferings, actions, ideas, emotions—the humanity—of the Vietnamese would likely end up as another instance of a white liberal assuming a universal humanity for himself. Furthermore, by refusing to bring forth images and descriptions of Vietnamese suffering in his war poems, Duncan avoids displaying his own moral ability. As Richard Dyer argues, "We may lacerate ourselves with admission of our guilt, but that bears witness to the fineness of a moral spirit that can feel such guilt—the display of our guilt is our calvary [sic]" (10-11). Duncan, then, does not place himself in a morally superior position to the readers in the war poems; there is no sense that Duncan is able to "feel the pain" or in anyway share in the torment of the Vietnamese people. Consequently, the war poems focus only on America's immoral actions, not on the consequences of these actions.

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In the sense that Duncan avoids describing the consequences of America's actions in the Vietnam War, however, he does place himself in a morally superior position. By including graphic descriptions of the atrocities carried out by the American army, Duncan provides proof that America's actions are immoral; without this proof, the only reason the reader has to believe Duncan's condemnations of the American government is that Duncan himself has access to a strict code of morality; Duncan's proof that his condemnations are just is that Duncan himself knows he is morally correct. When Duncan states that "There is no / good a man has in his own things except / it be in the community of every thing" (*BB* 79), the only code he uses to justify this belief is his personal belief in it. As a result, then, Duncan assumes that the reader's moral code will agree with his; he doesn't need to prove his morality, nor does he need to prove the reader's. Therefore, the text works to flatter the reader into accepting Duncan's moral statements; if she accepts his moral statements, Duncan will implicitly place her in the same morally superior position that Duncan claims for himself.

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Wednesday, May 26, 2004

In his essay "Towards an Open Universe," Duncan states the connections he sees between poetry, creation, reality, knowing, understanding, and experience. He states that "The most real, the truth, the beauty of the poem is a configuration, but also a happening in language, that leads back into or on towards the beauty of the universe itself. I am but part of the whole of what I am, and wherever I seek to understand I fail what I know" (3-4). This obviously suggests both the anarchic and Taoist elements in Duncan's aesthetics, but it also sets up a crucial distinction between understanding and knowing; specifically, Duncan privileges knowing over understanding. In common usage, people often treat these two terms as though they are synonyms, but, in fact, they offer two extremely different ways of dealing with the world around us. As Duncan treats them, knowing is experiential and requires a participation in order to occur; understanding, on the other hand, is a logical, distanced, disassociated ordering that takes place when the person either refuses or is unable to participate. Because of this, understanding is a limited function, one that is unable to achieve truth. Duncan explains that "Our engagement with knowing, with craft and lore, our demand for truth is not to reach a conclusion but to keep our exposure to what we do not know, to confront our wish and our need beyond habit and capability, beyond what we can take for granted, at the borderline, the light fingertip or thought-tip where impulse and novelty spring" (12). Knowing can achieve truth precisely because knowing does not seek to compartmentalize experience into different discrete quanta. Furthermore, knowing does not seek conclusions (which necessarily provide the boundaries needed for definition to occur), but instead establishes connections between things through craft. All of this implies that there can be confusion in knowing, since the mind in the instance of knowing exists "at the borderline," at its most creative, where it most connects with the body (both its own and the universal body of all creation).

All of this borrows heavily from other poets' aesthetics: Pound's "keep it moving," Creeley's definition of form as a matter of content, and Olson's proprioception are all definitely involved in creating Duncan's aesthetics. However, for Duncan there is a mystical element to aesthetics that all three of these other poets openly disavowed. For Duncan, writing poetry is a way to directly connect, through knowing, with the divine creative source that shapes everything in the universe, the divine creative source that he refers to as "the first things" or "the grand collage," among other things: "It is not that poetry imitates but that poetry enacts in its order the order of the first things, as just here in this consciousness, they may exist, and the poet desires to penetrate the seeming of style and subject matter to that most real where there is no form that is not content, no content that is not form" ("Towards" 6). For Duncan, writing poetry is a mythopoeic act, an act that forges connections not only between things, but between the poet and the divine: "To answer that call, to become the poet, means to be aware of creation, creature, and creator coinherent in the one event. There is not only the immanence of God, His indwelling, but there is also the imminence of God, His impending occurrence" (6).

Perhaps the best example of all of these elements occurs in "*Passages* 30, Stage Directions." "Stage Directions" is an intricate blending of the Pegasus myth and the viewing of a dead or dying person on tv, with passages from Shakespeare, Spenser, Pound, and Joyce, and with Duncan's personal anti-war and anti-government beliefs. The result of this blending is that Duncan's mind lays itself bare for the reader, as the poem jumps from image to image, thought to thought, with no connective material; the reader catches a glimpse into the parataxis of the creative, knowing mind of the poet who engages with all different types of matter. The two overarching frameworks that Duncan provides for the poem—that of a stage on which actions are played out and the mythological story of Pegasus—remain, as do all of the blended textual, visual, and intellectual elements, in a state that is both separate and combined; they are working, like stones in a mosaic, towards creating a greater picture, but, at the same time, the elements remain individually distinct. As such, they are neither truly separate nor combined, but instead coexist in a creative tension where they are both separate and combined. The reader who attempts to understand the way the poem uses these elements will undoubtedly fail; there simply isn't enough connective material present in the poem for the reader to understand how to logically organize such disparate elements. However, the reader who engages the poem as a site of knowing, thereby entering the poem as an instance of creation, will simply allow the elements to flow into and out of each other. Throughout the poem, Duncan plays out for us the act of creation, as he moves constantly between the reader position and the writer position, from observing as a viewer to stating as a storyteller. In fact, in this poem there is an inability to distinguish between these two positions, since Duncan more accurately fills both at the same time. For example:

> ("*So foule and faire a day I have not seene*," another
> murderous heart declares, who from Medusa's head

expects that Burning Wood—to echo Joyce's pun—
will never come to Dance Inane:
"*Come, seeling Night,*
"*Skarfe up the tender Eye of pitiful Day,*" he cries:
"*And with thy bloodie and invisible Hand*
"*Cancell and teare to pieces that great Bond,*
"*Which keepes me pale. Light thickens…*"
Shakespeare sees how in the assassin's mind
the world is filld with enemies, the truth
itself is enemy and quickens action to override
subversive thought. (*BB* 130)

In this passage, Duncan moves from reading *Macbeth* to writing with the words, to using Shakespeare's text to make his own point. The fact that the spelling is out of date proves that Duncan is reading this text, transcribing it from a book; however, the almost critical comments that explicate Shakespeare's text are the comments of an author, not a passive reader. The reference to Joyce also inhabits the position of both reader and writer, since Duncan openly admits his borrowing yet, at the same time, claims for himself an authorial position.

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Thursday, May 27, 2004

Duncan's anarchy relates intimately to his belief in organic structures. As he states in "The Concert, *Passages* 31," "the stars also / are and remain severe and distinct, / each being of the universe free to itself / having its own law" (*GW* 11). This notion of internal, private laws, laws that govern each individual in the way they conduct themselves and in the way they relate to others, lies at the heart of anarchy—there can be anarchy only when each individual learns to follow her or his internal laws and disregards or does away with any external, governmental laws. These internal laws are consequently organic in construction: they derive from the individual, and guide and shape the individual.

But for Duncan, these organic laws are more than ethical codes; they are also the physical examples of the creative drive in action. Moreover, these laws also shape the way that he writes a poem (and, for Duncan, writing a poem was in itself an ethical act precisely because it followed these organic structures). In "The Concert," Duncan locates these organic codes at the base of all creation:

> and the stars, mothers of light, remain,
>   having each
> its own "organic decorum, the complete
> loyalty of a work of art to a shaping
>   principle
>   within itself".... (*GW* 11)

Following this organic code means accepting individuality, accepting that there is a creative principle within each of us; however, this individuality is ethical and communal because it recognizes that each individual also contains a creative principle, and that these principles are all manifestations of the same principle. Consequently, Duncan's organic individuality is inherently permeable, at one and the same time open to all individuals of the community:

> First there is the power, and in the power
>   is the tone or tune,
> so that all of creation moves with
>   a music, the sound having its open
> doors in the mind; but in the heart
>   lieth its fountain.... (*GW* 12)

The music, the creative principle, comes from the heart, the organic centre of the individual; yet, at the same time, there must be an openness to the music created by the rest of the individuals in the community. Organicism, for Duncan, is fundamentally a respect for this communal individuality.

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Duncan's organicism also has a firm base in his belief of the inevitability of change. Indeed, part of anarchy's basic argument against government is that external laws remain far too static to be useful in a kinetic world. Specifically, this belief in change lies at the heart of *Passages*, since an acceptance of change brings with it an acceptance of incompleteness, of things constantly adapting and re-adapting to the world. The sequence form of *Passages* reflects this incompleteness, since each individual poem is part of a larger, never-ending continuum of poetry. As Christopher Beach argues,

> For Duncan in particular, the uncompletedness of [*The Cantos*], this cosmic form as "a creation in process," is a liberating factor. It underlies his thesis that the poem is "an organically incremental process," a "cell" in constant movement and mutation that overflows not only the permeable boundaries established between forms and genres but also those imposed between the works of one poet or poetic work and another. In this sense, the operation of a single lyric within the tradition of a long poem or poetic sequence such as "Song of Myself," *The Cantos*, or Duncan's own *Passages* and "The Structure of Rime" represents an intertextuality not only of language or semiotic systems but of forms themselves. (166)

Each individual poem in the *Passages* sequence follows its own organic law, as each poem works towards expressing its content in an appropriate, organic form. However, as Beach points out, all of the individual poems are aware of a larger, intertextual or communal level.

Furthermore, Duncan's acceptance of organic creation and creativity also brings with it a realization of transhistorical progress. Because of this acceptance of a larger process, the individual becomes a part of something bigger; this notion does not diminish the individual's importance, but, conversely, exalts the individual through her/his connection with a larger, almost divine creative process:

> . And in the whole community
> the death of Man at work, bee hive
> cells a-buzz with it,
> the thriving of Death among us

the work of Art to set words
jiving breaking into crises
in which a deathless strain moves thru
means without ends
Brancusi's towering column
moving into its true power,
into an imagined "endlessness", each stage of the form
dying upward, giving way
measures moving in eternity unmoving. (*GW* 19)

Somewhat paradoxically, Duncan finds an eternity in change, somewhat similar to Olson's remark that "What does not change / is the will to change" ("The Kingfishers" 5). Each life is a stage of the creative form, a stage that is always complete and perfect in itself yet always changing and progressing across the generations, "dying upward."

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Friday, May 28, 2004

There is a recurring sense in *Passages* that Duncan's use of language is also organic. By that, I mean that he views language as an organic system, another centre of creation that follows its own organic code of growth. Again, as with the individual, this organicism does not cut language off from other centres, but allows language to be both distinct and also interpenetrated with and by other centres—most obviously, the people who use language. In "Transmissions *Passages* 33," Duncan writes that

no one
nor poet
nor writer of words
can contrive to do justice to the beauty of that
design he designs from.
'We pretend to speak. The language is not ours
and we move upward beyond our powers into
words again beyond us unsure measures
the poetry of the cosmos.... (*GW* 21)

Though people, especially writers, use language, for Duncan there is a belief that language maintains an ideal level that remains beyond our access; in a way, it would make sense to differentiate between language (the ideal, eternal core in all language systems) and speech (the actual words we use to communicate) in Duncan's aesthetics. Language, as an ideal, connects directly to, or is part of, the creative principle that Duncan treats as the Divine; we can achieve at best limited access to this level of language, and even this limited access is possible only in the most ecstatic moments of speech in individual creation.

Sherman Paul notes that the image of the meadow or field in Duncan's poetry is both organic and palliative. Paul argues that for Duncan "Not only is the return necessarily psychological (of the psyche) to the mother-ground, it is a return to organic roots (respect for natural things) and etymological roots (human history manifest in the word, comprising the WORD)" (*Lost* 208). I would argue that this statement applies equally to the grand collage, the hive, the first things, or any other instance of an ideal zone of primary creation in Duncan's work, such as language. What is important in this notion is that Duncan believes that language bears in itself the history of its own growth and changes (much like a tree holds inside itself the rings of previous years). For Duncan, the organicism of language allows for a connection to previous users of language; language itself is a passageway into the past. Consequently, when Duncan includes quotes from earlier writers he is doing more than relaying information; he is also providing a connection for the reader and for himself, through language, into another time, into an earlier form of language. All of this necessarily implies that language is a tool that respects all individuals equally, since it does not follow the idea of progress; language changes, but, like individuals, it is complete and perfect during each of its moments of existence. Language, like all organic systems, is perfect but never complete, since it is constantly being altered:

> LET THE LINE SURPASS YOUR USES! the command
>   comes into the works.
> Not one but many energies shape the field.
>   It is a vortex.   It is a compost. (*GW* 22-3)

One further idea that this notion of language invites is that Duncan wants the reader to participate as an active equal in the creation of meaning, since the author attempts to make the poetic line surpass what the author him/herself intends. The poem, as a field of possibilities, is shaped by the reader's as well as the author's energies: "Just as the poet is also a reader at our side, studiously scanning his own lines in the act of writing, so we the readers are co-poets with him, joining Duncan in the work and making it new in our collaborative response. The 'Passages' are participatory in their form" (Reid 177).

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However, Duncan does not really deal with the reader as an equal in *Passages*. There is certainly a respect for the reader's personal beliefs and intelligence, but Duncan constantly places himself as the authority. Duncan is the moral authority (as shown in the war poems, where Duncan didactically explains what is wrong with America and who should be scorned), Duncan is the mystical authority (as shown in the early sequences, as well as the other mystical poems throughout, since Duncan is the prophet who connects with the Divine/the muse/creation), and Duncan is the literary authority (proven over and over again through his use of quotes, each one proving that Duncan's knowledge of the literary tradition is greater than the reader's). In each of these cases, Duncan obscures his dominant position by pointing out that he himself is subservient to another (there is an overarching morality inherent in creation, there is a Divinity to which Duncan defers, Duncan views those writers he quotes from as his masters), but, in reality, the reader's position is still subservient to Duncan; it makes no matter that Duncan has masters, since he is implicitly the readers' master. "Before the Judgement *Passages* 35" makes this hierarchy explicit: "Ezra Pound's *Spirit of Romance* opens our own period with his / announcement that "*The study of literature is hero-worship*" / Poetry having also its liturgy" (*GW* 29). Duncan openly upholds the hierarchical canon, and, furthermore, goes on to explain that he has himself been anointed, perhaps even appointed, to join this canon:

> So there was a covenant made with Good [sic] and into its orders I was born.

There was a covenant made that we call the Age of Gold, the Ancestral
Design,
  and this alone governs what endures.

And I was immersed into the depths of the Water,
  let down by that man who stood for my Father
  into the Element before Intention.... (*GW* 31)

The problem here is not so much the fact that Duncan claims himself to be an authority, since even an anarchist like Bakunin admits that authorities should be respected.[57] The problem is that Duncan sees this hierarchy as a hierarchy of the elect, which necessarily means that the reader, who the text implies is among the unchosen, can never manage to claim equality with Duncan.

Douglas Barbour, in his comments on this chapter, suggests a different way of interpreting the above point. Barbour asks "Couldn't Duncan be inviting readers to *join* the chosen, by reading his writing and his reading?" This is a valid question, and it is possible to view Duncan's didactic project as doing just that: educating readers so that they will be able to immerse themselves into the depths of Duncan's knowledge; in this case, Duncan would become our master, which creates a temporary knowledge hierarchy, since, with enough education, readers can also become masters themselves.

However, the problem with this reading is Duncan's notion of the elect; he states that "there was a covenant made with Good and into its orders I was *born*" (my emphasis). I don't believe that interpreting the knowledge hierarchy as a temporary inequality can do away with the permanent hierarchy contained in this notion of election, with its implicit belief that someone is either *born* into this covenant or else they can never be part of it. Even if we presume that Duncan believes all of his readers were likewise born into this covenant, there is still the implied arrogance of believing that those who don't read Duncan cannot be part of the covenant with the Good.

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[57] Bakunin writes: "Does it follow that I reject all authority? Far from me such a thought.... For such or such special knowledge I apply to such or such a *savant*. But I allow neither the bootmaker nor the architect nor the savant to impose his authority upon me" ("God and the State" 143). Bakunin understands that there are specialists in each field, and to ignore them is absurd; however, he stresses that his own reason must support the specialists, or it is absurd to follow their advice.

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Monday, May 31, 2004

The moments of hierarchical election in *Passages* exist uncomfortably next to the moments where Duncan is openly egalitarian. For example, in "O!, *Passages* 37," Duncan writes

> I
>   ever
> green
>   horn play
> my music
> as it goes
>   it comes to me. (*GW* 51)

Here, Duncan refutes the notion of personal election. Instead, he is a conduit through which creation flows, a conduit who is a perpetual, ignorant greenhorn. This is remarkably similar to the position of the reader, who engages with creation secondarily, at a remove.

What I would like to suggest by pointing out these contradictory moments in *Passages* is not that Duncan unwittingly goes against his earlier statements, but that he knowingly and intentionally does so. Part of Duncan's acceptance of organicism is his acceptance of the dualities that exist in all things. To Duncan, good and evil, light and dark, knowledge and ignorance co-exist in everything and everyone; it is the individual's choice to determine which of these he or she will follow, but, fundamentally, even the half of the binary that the individual does not follow still remains in a latent form in her or him. A good person still carries within him/herself the possibility of great evil, and vice versa. Evil, then, is not just an external pressure on us, nor is goodness. As Duncan writes in "*Passages* 36,"

> For a moment,
> ephemeral, we keep
> alive in the deepening shame of Man,
>   this room where we are, this house,

this garden, this home
  our art would make
in what is threatend from within.
House made of the changing of the light;
House made of darkness
  in which the stars again
    appear to view… (*GW* 81)

The house consists of both light and dark, and the darkness contains the light of the stars (just as the stars are surrounded by darkness). The house exists inside the shame of man as an area of goodness, yet even this house is threatened from within by an unmentioned evil; throughout *Passages*, there is an understanding of the permeable border at the centre of all binaries.

This understanding brings with it another lens through which we can observe Duncan's abusive anger in many of the sections of *Passages*: the belief that these binaries exist in all people allows Duncan to embrace his personal beliefs with the passionate intensity of a zealot. To be more precise, Duncan is a zealot for the notion of permeable duality; where he sees instances where one part of the binary has taken complete control, he feels justified in his rage. This justification appears at the end of "*Passages* 36":

I do not as the years go by grow tolerant
  of what I cannot share and what
refuses me. There's that in me as fiercely beyond
  the remorse that eats me in its drive
as Evolution is in
  working out the courses of what will last.
In Truth 'tis done. At last. I'll not
    repair. (*GW* 83)

Duncan openly refuses to passively accept that some people cut themselves off from the permeable duality he sees as necessary for ethical, creative life; to grow tolerant of that would be to allow firm borders to become entrenched, and Duncan abhors firm borders of any kind. Consequently, Duncan believes it is not only his right, but his moral duty to assault these firm borders with every weapon and strength at his command. Evolution, for Duncan, is the organic drive to tear down borders, and, as an agent of evolution, he refuses to repair (which, in this case, carries both the meaning of to mend as well as to remove oneself, to retreat). This is the chain of logic that Duncan follows in his support of strife as an element of the creative principle.

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Although Duncan is in some ways an oppositional poet, in other ways he is extremely accepting. This is because Duncan generally focuses his oppositionality against people who want to compartmentalize and patrol the boundaries between things; as for his relationship to his poetic predecessors, Duncan concentrates on practicing diversity (as opposed to the railing against the lack of openness he sees in politics, for example). In regards to Duncan's willingness to accept diverse poets, including poets who fundamentally disagreed with each other, Sherman Paul comments that "Inclusiveness necessarily begets impurity, but those who welcome it do not consider it impure" (*Lost* 178). This is where Duncan manages to turn away from his poetic masters, especially Pound and Olson, while still putting into practise the lessons he learned from them.

Christopher Beach explains that it is Duncan's willingness to combine, rather than delineate between his poetic forebears that sets him apart from his immediate influences:

> Duncan differs from Pound and Olson, however, in his respect, even humility, before the acknowledged "greatness" of his ancestor poets. If Duncan is a more forgiving reader of his predecessors than Olson, he is also more synchretic in his use of poetic sources. Rather than viewing ancestors as alternatives between which he must choose (which Olson does) Duncan sees them as sources of differences that can be combined and re-combined in productive endeavours.... Unlike Pound, whose ideogrammatic linkages in *The Cantos* generally establish an order of relations between concepts, Duncan uses a method of grand collage that seeks to allow new and unintended relations to enter the poem, never

> excluding such relations through what he considers Pound's "totalitarian" discriminations. (141)

Duncan's aesthetics, according to Beach, depends upon the synergistic resonances that experimenting with different combinations of poetic disciplines, movements, writers, etc., can create. In this regard, Duncan's poetry is experimental in a way that Pound's and Olson's was not: the latter two knew how they wished to incorporate others' work in their own and what they wanted to have those others' say before beginning to write, whereas there is an element of joyful exploration in Duncan's work. Beach explains this difference through the fact that Duncan, unlike the other two poets, did not have a regimented, somewhat reified poetic system when it came time to create a personal canon of influential forerunners:

> Duncan's choice of [poetic] models is not based on rigorous standards of technique, as is Pound's, nor is it guided by a sociohistorical stance toward reality like Olson's. Instead, Duncan's use of models is determined, or rather guided, by the 'movement' and 'association' of his readings of poetic and non-poetic texts, readings that cannot always be rationally explained but that enter his work as formal and spiritual "presences."… [Duncan's] aesthetic emphasizes a fluid use of sources that is not in Pound's or Olson's work. The various 'texts' that form Duncan's "true-book" are ordered primarily by his personal reading experience; they are not part of a system. (142)

Idiosyncratic and combinatory, open to the works of any writer who seemed talented or intelligent regardless of his or her personal aesthetics or politics, Duncan's poetry functions along a both/and notion of personal influence. This belief in the organic flow between all things is what sets Duncan apart from his more dogmatic peers and predecessors, especially in *Passages*, where Duncan most openly follows the practice of organic, combinatory forms. This openness reveals itself in the way that Duncan includes quotations from other texts:

> Duncan's use of other writers and texts becomes part of his stated aesthetic in a way that it is not for Pound or Olson. Where they both use

> the work of others primarily as a means to an end of supporting their own arguments or convictions, Duncan makes explicit that he is a 'derivative' poet: that to derive as well as 'to emulate, imitate, reconstrue, approximate, duplicate' is itself an important part of his art. (Beach 142)

Duncan does not, Beach argues, use quotations from other authors as evidence, as proof that his ideas are correct, which is how Pound and Olson use quotations. There is an attempt in Duncan's work to incorporate others' work into his own writing; Duncan does not want or attempt a complete assimilation of others' works (he almost always sets them apart by italicizing others' words or by openly citing the author), but, instead, wants to create a constructive tension between his words and others'.

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Tuesday, June 1, 2004

Joseph Mark Conte states that "Although *Passages* is indeed open-ended and incomplete, it seeks rather to maintain the disequilibrium of opposites than to balance them. This desire is an expression of the Heraclitean 'form as struggle,' the essential uneven condition of the poem" (51-2). Ian Reid states that "in the figural pattern of these poems [*Passages*] there is no absolute finality; last things are consumed in their turn by first things; the sense of an ending leads reiteratively into the sense of renewal. His is essentially a protological vision, a myth of origins and continuous fertility" (163). Both critics agree that *Passages*'s open form is a key aspect to the productive use of strife in the poems; the poems maintain a creative tension, whether it be in disequilibrium, or in a continuous fertility that does not allow for firm moments of disengaged contemplation. However, Reid goes on to argue that

> What needs to be emphasized, then, in a proper reading of those "Passages" that follow on from "The Multiversity" is that while they do give vent to a vehement sense of outrage at American belligerence in Asia they are not ultimately "about" that topical situation. To see them in a contemporary context alone is to misread radically.... The fact is that these are not anti-war poems but war poems, studies in struggle. While

> the Vietnam conflict is of course substantially present there, a ganglion of pain, it becomes simply the most salient manifestation in our day of an abiding social and spiritual reality which brings to poetry a mythic dimension. War, Duncan writes, is like love and poetry in that it expresses "the deepest forces and cleavings (adherences and divisions) of Man's hidden nature" ([*A Book of Resemblances*] vii)…. It is in this light that we should read "Up Rising" (25) and "The Soldiers" (26): not as simply wishing to repudiate other men's combative attitudes but as wishing to recreate, or discover the creative essence of, the antagonism that Duncan finds endemic in man and the universe. (168-69)

This opinion of the war poems in the sequence differs greatly from mine. To me, there is no doubt that these are anti-war poems because they are specifically anti-Vietnam War poems. The rage and disgust Duncan repeatedly shows for the Vietnam War and those Americans responsible for it is simply too explicit to me to argue that they are merely "studies in struggle." However, Reid does hint at a way to reconcile Duncan's anti-Vietnam War sentiments with his belief in the necessity of strife; when Reid says that *Passages* 25 and 26 "wish[] to recreate, or discover the creative essence of, the antagonism that Duncan finds endemic in man and the universe" he is partly correct. The reason, in my opinion, that Duncan is for strife but against the war is that strife is productive for Duncan; it is the basis of all creativity. However, the war is destructive, not constructive. The sense I get from the war poems is that Duncan hates the war because it is a war that does not seek to create anything new, but merely to destroy something (and that something is, of course, communism, which Duncan views in ideal terms as preferable to capitalist democracy). So Reid is correct in arguing that Duncan is not against war in general, but he is wrong in arguing that Duncan's war poems are not primarily about the Vietnam War. For Duncan, the Vietnam War is proof in the destructive, stultifying nature of the capitalist democracy of 1960s and 1970s America.

All of this points towards an unresolved issue in *Passages*, and an issue that Duncan avoids dealing with directly: how can post-Atomic war possibly be creative? Duncan takes the images he uses to support his belief in the creative possibility of war or violent conflict from the pre-industrial past, from the time of man to man combat: Christ and Osiris (*Passages* 3), Christ (*Passages* 8), the Arthurian legends (*Passages* 11), Marlowe's *Edward II* (*Passages* 18), Gassire's Lute (*Passages* 24), the American Revolution and ancient Egypt (*Passages* 32), the Greek Gods (*Passages* 35), and Tancredi and Clorinda ("Empedoklean Revelries") are only some of the easily recognized instances. It seems obvious to me that Duncan is torn; he believes in the necessity of strife, in the positive, creative aspects of a regeneration that depends on destruction, but he lives in a time when he does not see the personal integrity necessary for such a thing as noble, positive destruction or violence. For Duncan, then, the ideal is unreachable in his time. His hectoring against the Vietnam War is precisely because it is proof of how impossible the ideal is in his surrounding reality. And so Duncan dreams of noble violence, such as that of the Trojan War:

> but the battle I saw
> was on a wide plain,   for the
> sake of valor,
> the hand traind to the bow,
> the man's frame
> withstanding, each side
> facing its foe for the sake of
> the alliance,
> allegiance, the legion, that the
> vow that makes a nation
> one body not be broken. (*BB* 12)

However, the reality that Duncan faces is the pointless, ignoble violence of his day:

> conscripted, the pay being no goal, they are not true soldiers,
> not even sold on the war
> but from fear of punishment go, compelld, having no
> wish to fulfill in fighting
> but killing, killing,   to be done with it. (*BB* 114)

What Reid doesn't see is that Duncan's anti-war poems are precisely anti war because of the idealized belief he holds in the lost possibility of noble war. Noble war is fought by men who are personally invested in a specific, honourable goal; ignoble war is fought by non-invested men who leaders must either bribe or bully into taking part, and who consequently have no goal to work towards other than the near-sighted goal of war itself: to kill as many of the opposing forces as possible. Duncan's anti-war poems in *Passages* decry the fact that any war in the modern age is necessarily ignoble. The fact that Duncan all but completely avoids reference to either of the World Wars, which people often hold up as just wars in which America participated, supports the notion that he does not believe modern wars can be noble.

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Wednesday, June 2, 2004

With his profound interest in the mystical and the divine in life, as well as his belief that writing poetry is a way to connect with the divine creative principle, I think it is almost inevitable that people will draw comparisons between Duncan and the Romantics, particularly Coleridge, who Duncan openly admired. Duncan referred to himself as a Romantic, as well, but one should note that his Romanticism differed from the accepted norm; as he remarks in his essay "As Testimony," "I was to be a Romantic, but it was to be no simple Romanticism, such as courses in college portrayed and, despised in the portrayal, for in the Romantic too there was to be now no element that was not seen as a function at once of the poem and of the mind; and no element of poem or mind that was not to be seen as a function of a social and historical consciousness" (139). In other words, Duncan extended the Romantics' notion of organicism beyond nature, since he chose to view organicism through the lens of society and history (both of which, of course, contained elements of the organic themselves in Duncan's mind).

In terms of *Passages*, Conte provides a valuable distinction between Duncan's organicism and that of the Romantics. He states that

> Duncan extends the theory of organicism to his *Passages*, but a new physics has taken over from the old physiology. Coleridge's elected analogue, the plant, cannot anticipate the structure of Duncan's infinite

> series. The analogy of a plant suggests a continuous, linear development—organic growth: from the seed the roots and stem sprout…. Schrödinger's "field" of view is not agricultural but atomic: in organic molecules, the semiautonomous atoms are in constant motion, changing places as easily as they exchange functions. Duncan's analogy, following Olson, is drawn from particle physics; he insists on "a form as a field of things in action instead of the development of a path" (BH[58] 4). His serial form not only disputes the necessity of *telos*, completion, but it also challenges the validity of direct consequence—any situation in which *A* must follow *B*. (53-4)

Duncan's organicism is one that focuses on the individual particles of creation, not the entire organism; it is a cellular organicism. This attention to the smallest blocks and how they interrelate with each other is anarchic, in that there is a belief that the outcome of any collection (organisms, nations, books, etc) of individuals (cells, people, poems, etc.) extends properly from the individual outwards, as opposed to from the collective level inwards. The result is that any collectivity should be studied from the smallest cell outwards, since it is the interrelations of the cells that determine the collective. As Thomas Gardner explains, this attention to the cells drives a belief in the uniqueness of each individual in the collective:

> Each part has an almost infinite series of possible connections and identities within the ensemble… and as each part is "awakened" or "inspired," it becomes more fully aware of those possible connections. For Whitman, then, Duncan writes, "Self is most intensely experienced in the individual's unique identity as part of the universe at large" (CP 83); as the self responds to the "particular and details moving in vast masses," it becomes conscious of, as fully and deeply as possible, its own unique "network of associations" (IE xiii), and thus its sense of locality, within that moving universe. (288)

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[58] This refers to George Bowering and Robert Hogg's *Robert Duncan: an Interview*, Coach House, 1971.

What this idea means is that Duncan adapts his anarchism to suit his personal beliefs. No longer is the anarchic individual completely self-contained; instead, the individual only becomes unique within a group. There is an understanding in Duncan that the influences offered between the individual and the group is a two-way street, something that Bakunin, with his belief in an individual who cannot be taught something for which he or she does not already have an instinct ("Statism and Anarchy" 167), cannot accept. For Duncan, the community influences the individual as much as the individual influences the community.

In terms of *Passages*, these ideas suggest the importance of the sequence form. The sequence allows the individual cell-poems to exist both on their own and in communal relationship at the same time. This allows Duncan to write rather closed, self-contained poems, which then take on greater resonances through the explicit connections that appear between these poems once they become part of the *Passages* sequence. Moreover, it is precisely when dealing with the macro-level of the sequence that the reader should take an active creative role. It is up to the reader to forge—not to discover, but to actually create—the connections that Duncan implicitly states are there but leaves as a lack in the sequence.

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To say that the poems are more or less closed in and of themselves does not mean that each poem in the sequence is necessarily unified. Each poem can also be looked at as a collective composed of smaller cells. For example, there are the quotes from other authors that Duncan leaves intact and separated from his own writing, such as the passages from Gustave Stickley's *Craftsman Homes* that appear in "The Architecture *Passages* 9"; these are smaller individual cells that appear within the poem, and that Duncan leaves unconnected to his writing (although the reader may provide connections between these pieces and the rest of the poem). Duncan leaves these connections as a lack, and so the structure of the poem mirrors the structure of the sequence. The same is true for the use of the word as a cell in "The Fire *Passages* 13," which leaves the connections between the words in the blocks that open and close the poem as a lack.

However, there are more subtle uses of cells within poems. In "Empedoklean Reveries," for example, Duncan writes in a series of cell-sections that sometimes openly contradict each other; in fact, the only obvious connections between these intra-cells is that they each offer a different opinion or aspect of love. Consequently, Duncan can talk about, in only just over four pages and in this order: his own love life, his relationship with his cat, Blake's views on the line in painting, colour theory, the sun and the moon, Greek *daimones*, Darwin's thoughts on organization, Monteverdi's *Combattimento di Tancredi e Clorinda*, and Schrödinger's thoughts on the organism. Each of these is a cell within the poem, and Duncan never explains how or why he moves from one cell to another. He merely ends the poem with

> As if in the distance,   arriving or departing,
>   the dying or arising of a roar
>   --the Arrival or Departure--
>   animal laughter
>   advancing
>   thematic
> to all that's gone
>   "before". (*GW* 145-6)

The roar alludes back to the beginning of the poem, "I have tamed the lion roar" (*GW* 142), which might imply gaining some control over love, since this line immediately follows the cell where Duncan admits having "been [Love's] battlefield" (*GW* 142). The ending seems to imply that everything that has come before it is thematically linked (possibly by the theme of love), but refuses to explain the link. Much like the use of the sequence in *Passages*, where there is never any reason given why the disparate poems form a sequence, the ending of "Empedoklean Reveries" merely states that there is a reason for the intra-cells to be linked together; what these links are, however, is left up to the reader to decide.

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Thursday, June 3, 2004

Two *Passages* that appear in *Ground Work II* are particularly interesting because of the way Duncan uses language in them, particularly the way he uses foreign languages. In "Et" and "In Wonder" Duncan uses German and especially French in a way he rarely, if ever uses them in any of the other *Passages*. Specifically, these are the only two *Passages* where Duncan writes in a language other than English for any length of time, and there is a particular effect that is unique to these two poems. For example, Duncan begins "Et" with a long passage in French:

puis sommes descendus au vaisseau
  avons posé la quille aux brisants
        lá-bas
où la mer cherchait toujours
    des marges nouvelles
      des envahissements
        des confusions éternelles
la démarrons! la faisons
    le passage
          au-delà
dérivés (*GWII* 43)

Duncan also writes in French and German in "In Wonder," in which he moves fluently from English into and out of these other languages. Of course, other languages appear throughout the *Passages* sequence, so this is not unique in and of itself. What sets the use of language apart in these *Passages* is that Duncan is actually writing in the other languages; for almost every other poem in the sequence to this point, foreign languages appear only when Duncan quotes from a text written in a foreign language, etc. For example, there is the use of Italian in "Empedoklean Reveries," where Duncan quotes from Monteverdi's libretto, the appearance of French in "Wine *Passages* 12," when Duncan quotes from Baudelaire and Rimbaud, among many other examples. Especially early in the sequence, Duncan is meticulous in not only separating his quotations through the use of italics, but he also cites the works from which he has borrowed, either in the poem itself or in the "Notes" that conclude *Bending the Bow*. All of this marks the foreign language as something Other that Duncan is reaching out to and forging connections with in his grand collage; as a result, the appearance of a foreign language early in the sequence invariably points the reader in the direction of another author, and so it is partly a didactic tool. Moreover, Duncan often at least partially translates these quotations for his reader, as in "Eye of God *Passages* 29":

> *Du haut de la tour sans toit où l'Extase m'a porté*
> *j'ai regardé le monde triste et froid, noir et agité*
> From the height of the endless tower where Ecstasy carried me:
> I have gazed at the cold and sad world, black, and agitated.... (*BB* 124)

In fact, early in the sequence, Duncan hardly ever includes untranslated quotations, often using a translation instead of the original in his text, such as in the quotation from Julian that introduces the sequence (*BB* 9). Looking back at these early poems, there is a noticeable lack of foreign languages, even in poems where we would expect them to appear, such as "Spelling *Passages* 15"; this poem, which includes long passages on etymology, would be an obvious place to offer foreign words, but the only ones Duncan includes are those that are already known to us, such as in his examination of the beginnings of the dipthong "ch": "**Xaire**, rejoice **Xaos**, the yawning abyss. **Xarakter**, / the mark engraved, the *intaglio* of a man. / Xaris, Xaritas grace, favour" (*BB* 49). The foreign words are not really foreign at all, but merely English words that are in disguise; once the reader realizes this, these words lose their foreignness.

The important aspect of all of this is that, early in the sequence, Duncan is extremely careful to make sure that he uses language in such a fashion that it always signifies for the English-speaking reader. When he includes foreign words, he either translates them, or he intends them to point us towards a certain author. Duncan uses language to convey a restricted meaning in the early *Passages*.[59] This is not so in "Et" and "In Wonder." In these two *Passages*, Duncan leaves the foreign passages untranslated. Moreover, the foreign passages are not references to or quotations from other works; they are Duncan's own writing. Language, all of a sudden, does not serve specific meanings for the English-speaking readers; instead, the poems leave those readers who do not understand the foreign language to wonder what Duncan is saying. Why, so late in the game, does Duncan change language strategies?

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[59] In fact, it should be realized that Duncan implicitly refuses to follow the path set down by Pound in his *Cantos*, where the English-speaking reader was expected to know the foreign languages that were included, or else they would not understand what was being written. Pound refused to offer helpful hints to his readers, as Duncan always does in the *Passages* that appear in *Bending the Bow* and *Ground Work: Before the War*.

My theory—and it is definitely only a theory—is that the use of language in these two particular *Passages* shows Duncan moving partially towards the usage of language as it appears in Language poetry. I suggest that Duncan has been influenced by his reading of Language poets (such as Jackson Mac Low, to whom he refers in *Passages* "The Missionaries") in such a way that he at least partially accepts the notion that language does not always have to refer to a referent in the reader's mind for it to contain some meaning. Of course, Duncan never truly accepts the challenges of Language poetry in his own work, since he is still writing in communicative languages,[60] but the turn to French and German, a turn which necessarily leaves some of his readers outside of the foreign words' signification, does suggest that Duncan accepts that language need not be strictly controlled by the author. In particular, it shows that language no longer must be the tool of didacticism, as it was in the earlier *Passages*.

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Friday, June 4, 2004

In the final *Passages*, Duncan puts forward perhaps his strongest statements on the interpenetration of things. For example, in "The Dignities" "there is no act that is not chaind in its joy, Comedian, to the suffering of the world!" (*GWII* 57), and in "In Blood's Domaine" Duncan states that "Link by link I can disown no link of this chain from my conscience. / Would you forget the furnaces of burning meat   purity demands? / There is no ecstasy of Beauty in which I will not remember Man's misery" (*GWII* 69). The poems intimately link together joy and pain, *eros* and *eris*. The text does not view them as opposites but rather as two manifestations of the same creative principle, where destruction is only the first stage of recreation.

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[60] Carl D. Esbjornson argues that Duncan's reluctance to completely abandon linguistic meaning is a part of Duncan's belief in strife: "Struggle is central to Duncan's poetics. At the generative center of the poem, the poet's apprehension of linguistic indeterminacy contends with his belief in the power of the word to achieve its meaning. Since, for Duncan, language is coextensive with experience, strife, as a primary truth of experience, enters into the very language itself" (74).

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Another major theme in *Passages* is the interpenetration of all things, and in "Regulators" Duncan expands on his notion of interpenetration by concentrating on the role perception plays. Over and over again, Duncan suggests that interpenetration only exists for the individuals who are willing to notice it in the things of the world. Duncan argues that "there is this last voice, first voice   this 'Gloria'   this one beginning / flower of song / this lingering of a scent in every thing" (*GWII* 60) that runs through all of existence, but, of course, this connection is faint, only a *lingering* scent, and is something easily overlooked by those not attuned to it. Again, looking at a painting, Duncan remarks on the connection that is available to everyone who would seek it out: "Van Gogh's making for us to see   the soul-truth of this peach tree in bloom speech / burst forth into flamboyant meaning   —it is the ensemble of colors the painting brings forth / leaf tongues… (*GWII* 62). Moreover, it is important to notice that in both of these examples Duncan links the connection to language, to song and speech. In "Enthtralld" Duncan makes this link even more explicit, as the connection becomes dependant on the act of reading:

> thruout we search   to be   "He", "She", and "It"   three persons in the
> [presentation move
>   where you and I   willing to be entranced and
>   in the enhancement wary   read   into the third person
>   pass   ourselves   lost
>   as if in speaking begun the world at last would complete itself in "us"
>   and we become there parts of speech   "told"… (*GWII* 65)

Only those people who allow themselves to become entranced, specifically to be entranced by language, by reading, will become aware of the connections between. It is as though the reader, by forming a connection to the author through the text, is able to move beyond him/herself, to read him/herself into the third person that is neither reader nor author, but someone connected to both.

The importance of language and reading is not confined in *Passages* to people and texts. For Duncan, the entire world is a text that both speaks and that can be read:

"When you see trees swaying about they are talking to one another"
about what   I do not know   I read into the sway
I cannot see the wind   but the light shimmering in the leaves dances in
[the wind's confusion to speak
I hear in seeing
Still the flesh sings
fresh from making love   our two bodies
stretcht upon each other   tuning
turning and returning   beyond
eucalyptus trees in one foliage dance with the wind in
their branches
and your eyes shine   answering
the deep going shine and tone I have been
released into.
How young my sixty-one years are in me!
How just arrived where I am again I can be.
It is just this afternoon   just this hour
yet how entirely life races
in the blue of the sky my eyes find themselves
feeding the sight (*GWII* 65)

This communication between the reading/perceiving individual and the physical world is not a passive relationship, since it calls for the reader to actively interpret the signs put forward before her/him, but Duncan is truly positive that the possibility of communication is always there, and it is this communication that connects all things. Speech is the method of these connections, as Duncan says in his essay "Crisis of Spirit in the Word":

> We have something called speech, and many people write that what is remarkable and sets man apart is that he alone has speech. Linguists

> write all over the place. It gives a superiority to creation. As if the rest of creation were not revelation. But I remember no stage at which the world did not speak to me. And I believe deeply that we make out of the sound of our mouths a speech to answer to the speech, the profound depth with which the mountains speak to us, the sky speaks to us. I see the whole world as creation and revelation. It is in order to enter that profundity that we have our forms of speech. (65)

For Duncan, human speech is a secondary form of communication, an attempt to re-connect with the physical world around us, a world that practices an older, primary form of communication.

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Duncan's notion that an omnipresent communication occurs between all things also informs the form of his poetry. As Thomas Parkinson argues, the use of fractures, abrupt changes, and what I earlier called intra-cells (apparently unconnected pieces within the same poem) is another example of how Duncan refuses to admit boundaries or conclusions between things:

> Duncan continuously experiments without conclusion, so that if a conclusion is drawn, that becomes in turn the occasion for fresh development. Nothing is "finished," both in the sense of intellectual and historical development and in the sense of the work of art.... Finish and accomplishment are not the ends of art, though they occasionally occur in the work. Keeping the imagination of possibilities matters [sic] more than any finality. (52-3)

The sequence format of *Passages* is a direct result of this refusal to accept conclusions, as is the habitual inclusion of quotations from other authors (no conclusion to any author's works). Even within his own writing, Duncan counsels himself not to be taken in by the idea that things conclude: "Will I outlive the end of the rime I meant to come to?" he asks himself at the end of "After Passage"; he responds by denying the possibility of the existence of fixed conclusions: "Quiet, my soul, O   follow the lead of the Nuttall song sparrow. // What is complete but rests in the momentary illusion" (*GWII* 70).

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"In Blood's Domaine" ties together the elements of strife and interpenetration in a profoundly personal, intimate way, as Duncan views the breakdown of the body, due to age and disease, as another example of how both of these themes are inherently part of human being. There is an acceptance that illness and death are merely a change of one form of life for another: "Hel shines in the very word *Health*   as *Ill* in the Divine Will shines. / The Angel Cancer crawls across the signs of the Zodiac to reach its / appointed time   and   bringing down the carnal pride   bursts into flower…" (*GWII* 67). This strife that the body contains is not evil, but natural, and is another example of how nature refuses to accept boundaries:

> Lovely then
> that Death come to carry you away from the moment of this splendour
> that bursts the cells of your body   like a million larvæ triumphant
> comes to life in the fruit   All the spreading seeds, the viral array
> taking over flesh as the earth it is
> scarlet eruptions
> And the pneumatics torn in the secret workings of the Angel
> [Tuberculosis
> (No, I do not speak of Evils or of Agents of Death but these Angels
> are attendants of lives raging within life, under these Wings we dread
> viruses, bacilli   come home to thrive in us… (*GWII* 68)

Strife creates new life, as the sick body bursts into flower, as seeds sprout. For Duncan, death is not the end; instead, the dead are carried away to another place, and so death is merely another passage.

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Tuesday, June 8, 2004

N. Katherine Hayles writes, in relation to chaos and communication, that "Chaos is the womb of life, not its tomb" (100). It's hard to think of a more Duncanian phrase

than this, given his focus on the productive elements on strife and his refusal to allow fixed boundaries. In fact, it is quite productive to look at *Passages* in terms of chaos; essentially, it is similar to what Duncan means by strife, and appears in the sequence both in the content and the form. In terms of content, chaos can be a good or a bad thing, just as I argue strife can be (see the section dated
Friday, May 21, 2004 for a discussion on the negative aspects of strife/chaos in *Passages*); however, chaos is always positive when it comes to form. *Passages* is chaotic in its use of parataxis, its introduction of material from other authors, and its use of languages other than English. All of these elements work to introduce chaos into the sequence, since, in its most basic literary form, chaos is equivalent to surprise. Furthermore, Hayles explains that "when there is no uncertainty about what the message will be [the amount of information relayed] drops to zero, just as it does when the message is completely improbable. Maximum information is conveyed when there is a mixture of order and surprise, when the message is partly anticipated and partly surprising" (53). This mixture of order and surprise is precisely what Duncan achieves in *Passages*; the result is that this sequence, which constantly keeps the reader both guessing and yet also reassured—guessing what will come next, or guessing what the connections between pieces or intra-pieces are; reassured by the fact that Duncan never truly questions the possibility or appropriateness of signification in language in his poetry—offers more usable or decodeable information to the reader than poetry that is more conservative or more experimental in form. Conventional writers, such as Frost, for example, offer too much order, while more experimental writers, such as many Language poets, offer too much chaos. By striking a balance between these two, *Passages* challenges the reader in a way unavailable to these other poets.

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The chaotic structure of *Passages* also shows an acceptance on Duncan's part of the necessity of new forms. In comparison to Pound, for example, though there are certainly similarities, there is a profound difference in terms of form:

> Duncan is dismayed by what he considers the last minute and unnecessary efforts of Pound and Olson to bring their poems to

> "completion" or to some greater degree of "coherence." While a modernist epic such as *The Wasteland* is composed of fragments shored against the ruins of a once viable whole, Duncan's *Passages* is an articulation of parts which is intentionally incomplete; it is neither the mending of a modern culture fractured by mortar fire nor the romantic failure of the poet to realize his aspirations. (Conte 49)

Conte actually goes so far as to see Duncan offering a corrective to Pound:

> As an infinite series, *Passages* is at once derivative of the Poundian epic and corrective: it is woven at the loom of many materials and so offers no single narrative "line" to tug at; and yet (the emphasis should be positive here) it is less "ambitious" than Pound's compulsive desire for bounds, his initial limit of one hundred cantos and his final efforts to make it "cohere." (59)

What this shows, though, is a paradoxical adherence to Pound's teachings. If we propose that Pound's statement "Make it new" sums up his aesthetics, Duncan is what we might term a devout heretic in relation to Pound. As opposed to Olson, who remained a more unswerving student of Pound's form, Duncan makes Pound's forms new in *Passages*. In a sense, Duncan could be claimed to be the most devout follower of Pound precisely because he took Pound's forms themselves to be open to change .

The problem with Duncan's desire for renovation is that new forms rarely reach a wide audience. Jean-François Lyotard puts the desire for renovation within a decidedly narrow camp of literature:

> If they do not wish to become supporters (of minor importance at that) of what exists, the painter and novelist must refuse to lend themselves to such therapeutic uses. They must question the rules of art of painting or of narrative as they have learned and received them from their predecessors. Soon those rules must appear to them as a means to deceive, to seduce, and to reassure, which makes it impossible for them to be "true." Under the common name of painting and literature, an unprecedented split is taking place. Those who refuse to re-examine the

> rules of art pursue successful careers in mass conformism by communicating, by means of the "correct rules," the endemic desire for reality with objects and situations capable of gratifying it.… As for the artists and writers who question the rules of plastic and narrative arts and possibly share their suspicions by circulating their work, they are destined to have little credibility in the eyes of those concerned with "reality" and "identity"; they have no guarantee of an audience. ("Answering" 41)

Finally, this dire thought offers a possible compromise to my often felt fear of working as an agent (though a minor agent, of course) of recuperation of experimental texts. Lyotard's thoughts call for critics to offer themselves as champions for experimental works, for them to drive the culture industry forward by opening and maintaining a dialogue with the challenges of experimental texts. This dialogue will inevitably bring about some recuperation of the text, but it will also make sure that the text does not merely disappear into complete oblivion. More importantly, the dialogue will keep the experimental text's challenges from disappearing, and, if Linda Hutcheon's conceptualization of the complicitous critique is correct, this means that no challenge can ever be completely recuperated (see the entry dated Wednesday December 15, 2004 in chapter one.)

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Chapter Five

"The noise book addresses their vigil": Erin Mouré's *Pillage Laud*

Monday, June 14, 2004

Pillage Laud:

Pillage (n):[61]

- The action of plundering or taking as spoil; spoliation, plunder: chiefly that practised in war; but also in extended sense, extensive or wholesale robbery or extortion. Also *fig.*
- Goods forcibly taken from another, esp. from an enemy in war; booty, spoil, plunder. *Obs.*
- Some kind of impost or tax. *Obs.*

Pillage (v):

- *trans*. To rob, plunder, sack (a person, place, etc.): esp. as practised in war; to rifle.
- To take possession of or carry off as booty; to make a spoil of; to appropriate wrongfully.
- *absol*. or *intr*. To take booty; to plunder; to rob with open violence.

So, to begin with, *Pillage* gives the idea of something taken violently by force, to rob. Or the object that was robbed. To appropriate wrongly.

Laud (n):

- Praise, high commendation. Also in laud of, honour and laud, laud and glory (honour, thanks); to give laud. Now rare exc. in hymns.
- A cause or subject for praise. rare.
- A hymn or ascription of praise.
- *Obs*. Decision, judgement.
- A Spanish lute.

Laud (v):

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[61] All definitions are selected definitions, taken from the online *Oxford English Dictionary*.

- *trans*. To praise, to sing or speak the praises of; to celebrate. Often to laud and bless (praise, magnify). Originally implying an act of worship.

Next, there is something being praised, or someone offering praise. A hymn, a judgement, or a Spanish lute. Well, it seems obvious that we can set aside the latter, and suggest that *Laud* is a praising hymn, or a praising judgement, perhaps in a worshipful or exaggerating way.

And so a *Pillage Laud*: a hymn that praises robbery; a stolen object worthy of honour or thanks. A judgement that has been stolen. Praise that has been wrongfully taken through violence. A stolen hymn of praise. Praise for a stolen hymn. Worship of violent robbery. Something stolen through a violent act that deserves to be praised. Though not with a Spanish lute?

Play is in full force in the title. And so the title suggests a playful, violent act of theft that deserves to be praised. The text is a hymn offering praise to this violent robbery. But all of this is merely words. So the questions: *Are the words being stolen?* or *Are the words the thieves? Are the words offering praise?* or *Is praise being offered to the words?*

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If the title holds more questions than answers, the subtitle is even more indeterminate: *Pillage Laud: cauterizations, vocabularies, cantigas, topiary, prose*. Why the shift from plural to singular? why not "and prose"? And the words themselves:

Cauterize:

- Med. *trans*. To burn or sear with a hot iron or a caustic.
- To brand with a hot iron. *Obs*.
- *fig*. To 'sear', deaden, render insensible (the conscience, feelings, etc.).

Vocabulary:

- A collection or list of words with brief explanations of their meanings; now esp. a list of this kind given in an elementary grammar or reading-book of a foreign language.
- The range of language of a particular person, class, profession, or the like.
- The sum or aggregate of words composing a language.

- *fig.* A set of artistic or stylistic forms, techniques, movements, etc.; the range of such forms, etc., available to a particular person, etc.

Cantiga:

- A Spanish or Portuguese poem or folksong.

Topiary:

- Consisting in clipping and trimming shrubs, etc. into ornamental or fantastic shapes.
- The topiary art; the training and clipping of trees into artificial shapes.

Prose:

- The ordinary form of written or spoken language, without metrical structure; esp. as a species or division of literature. Opposed to poetry, verse, rime, or metre.
- *fig.* (from 1). Plain, simple, matter-of-fact, (and hence) dull or commonplace expression, quality, spirit, etc. (The opposite of poetry.)
- A dull, commonplace, or wearisome discourse or piece of writing; a prosy discourse. Also, a dull, prosy person. colloq.
- Old colloq. Familiar talk, chat, gossip; a talk.
- *attrib.* (often hyphened to the following word). Consisting of, composed or written in prose.
- *fig.* Having the character of prose; plain, matter-of-fact, commonplace: = prosaic.

Pillage Laud is a collection of branded, seared, burned, deadened, insensible things; it is a collection of words that form a (possibly foreign) language or a personal style; it is a series of Spanish or Portuguese poems (bring back that Spanish lute!); it is (like all books?) a tree clipped and trimmed into fantastic, artificial shapes; it is the plain, simple, ordinary, familiar form of written or spoken language.

And so *Pillage Laud* is a collection of simple, familiar language—though possibly a foreign language, like Spanish or Portuguese—clipped and trimmed, branded and seared, into artificial shapes. Luckily, this definition seems to work.

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Perhaps most importantly, the list of definitions that I have just offered is absurd; it is an absurd thing to do: fall back on the dictionary meaning, the most reified, safe, confirmed, and dead meaning possible for an uttered sound or a scribbled mark. The parataxis embedded in the title and the subtitle is not something that the dictionary can explain away through definition—why, then, trust the definitions of these words, since they are possibly, quite likely, even, appearing together for the first time in the history of language? The oddness of the list precludes the possibility of a dictionary definition ever capturing the connotations the list suggests. The summarized definitions that I have offered are absurd in their confidence; how can such a group of words be positively, absolutely defined? It can't—and that is the point. The list of words strikes us as odd because it emits possible connotations and meanings; communicative language normally intends to limit these.

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Tuesday, June 15, 2004

A constant tension exists between sense and nonsense in *Pillage Laud*. This tension in part depends on the parataxis of its form, since most sentences in *Pillage Laud* are straightforward in terms of meaning; by this, I don't mean to suggest that it is easy to understand the meaning of most of the sentences, but instead that most of the sentences contain the possibility of meaning inside themselves. For example, take the beginning to "Pillage 4 ('Bowness')":

> Since certain minute ends must crawl, so texture a library was childhood,
> and to race would sound velocity,
> and you left.
>
> You were the orchestras of presence.
>
> What had such categories gathered?
> Hydrogen was so partisan a testament. (26)

None of these sentences is meaningless; in fact, the most difficult sentence to understand, the first sentence, contains four rather straightforward clauses. It is only in the connections, or lack thereof, that bind these clauses together that any difficulty in meaning arises, and, even here, the sentence as a whole is far from meaningless. In fact, the opening sentence is no more meaningless than a line from a surrealist text; in other words, meaning exists in the sentence, and it is only a matter of decoding or interpreting the sentence in order to determine its meaning(s). Consequently, I would argue that Mouré is not attempting to deny the possibility of accessing meaning through language.

The elements of nonsense enter into *Pillage Laud* through the parataxis of its sentences. The odd leaps of logic and illogic, leaps that the text never explains for the reader, deny sense at the same time they create it; yes, each sentence makes some sort of sense, but the sentences do not cohere, they do not relate to each other in a logical, sensible fashion—they do not build a coherent, meaningful whole. In this way, the poems of *Pillage Laud* are very much "cauterizations" and "topiar[ies]," as they constantly foreground their contorted leaps between sentences (or, as mentioned above, between clauses within the same sentence). And yet, even at their most difficult moments, the poems in the collection never fully escape a semi-determined meaning; this is the true struggle between sense and nonsense in the poems, for, though the individual poems appear to strive to break free of sense, Mouré maintains too firm a grip on meaning for this to ever truly take place. The reason this is so is because of the introduction Mouré provides to the collection, in the "Secret de la Rencontre": "Pillage Laud [sic] selects from pages of computer-generated sentences to produce lesbian sex poems, by pulling through certain found vocabularies, relying on context: boy plug vagina library fate tool doctrine bath discipline belt beds pioneer book ambition finger fist flow. Erin Mouré September 1997-July 1998" (n. pag.). This explanation, the first text that we encounter upon opening the book, removes any chance that the poetry that follows will possibly escape sense because it provides the reader with an easy definition for the poetry prior to reading the poetry: whatever follows will be "lesbian sex poems." Mouré provides an overarching discursive construct into which the reader can place the poems.

It is the appearance of this overarching discursive construct that sets *Pillage Laud* apart from the anarchic poetry of Cage and Duncan, even though, at first blush, there seems to be a great deal of similarity between Mouré's text and the others. Cage's "Writing for the Second Time Through *Finnegans Wake*" and Duncan's *Passages* both rely heavily on parataxis, and all three texts call into question the unified subjectivity of the author: Duncan's openly derivative stance and his multiplicity of speaking voices, Cage's use of Joyce's text, and Mouré's use of computer-derived sentences all work to deny the author's often tyrannical control over his material. However, Cage and Duncan, as committed anarchists, do not attempt to counter their texts' challenges to their authority by imposing their own interpretations of the text's meaning, which is what Mouré does when she labels *Pillage Laud* as "lesbian sex poems." The question then becomes, why does Mouré limit the indeterminacy of her own text through the use of such a heavy-handed authorial statement?

Several answers are possible. Most obviously, Mouré, unlike Cage and Duncan, is not an avowed anarchist and so she is not bound by any personal desire or need to maintain a coherent philosophy in her work. Secondly, it is possible that Mouré simply didn't realize that she was working at cross-purposes to her poetry. Neither of these answers is very satisfying for me, though; the first merely makes Cage and Duncan seem dogmatic, while the second makes Mouré seem incompetent. Both of the options are possible, though. However, I would prefer to think that a third option is more accurate: Mouré is following a specific personal philosophy in limiting the indeterminacy of her poetry, just as Cage and Duncan were following their personal philosophies in expanding the indeterminacy of their poetry. Specifically, I would argue that Mouré is following a philosophy of identity politics that comes from her openly lesbian sexuality. Just as Cage refused to allow his homosexuality to enter into his writing, due to his preference to avoid oppositional politics, and just as Duncan openly wrote about his homosexuality but refused to join what he saw as the cult of homosexuality, Mouré's writing strategy is deeply involved with her homosexuality. Her decision to place her poetry under the overarching discursive construct of lesbian sex and sexuality ensures that her work will be discussed in terms of her lesbian identity; it would be difficult, and extremely problematic, to write about *Pillage Laud* without discussing Mouré's homosexuality, which is one of the main reasons that she adopts such a discursive strategy: it *forces* readers, critics, and reviewers to deal with the issue of homosexuality.

Moreover, since this discursive strategy fundamentally shapes the poems' meanings, Mouré implies that her sexuality shapes entire identity. This means that all of *Pillage Laud* must be read through the lens of an omnipresent lesbian sexuality; even in the moments when the poetry has nothing to do with sex or sexuality, the text is still an example of lesbian sex poems. Take, for example, a section such as the opening to "Pillage 8 ('Rachel-Julien')":

> What had so meaningless a book sheltered?
> Film will remove the chemical region between the valve
> and the message.
>
> While I am exposing this condition, what can't another state
> undergo?
> The library panicked.
>
> A shaking evening was a label. Had the wastes of electricity
> switched the words of worry? (50)

There is nothing specifically "lesbian" about this section, but, because we know that these are lesbian sex poems, we read it along those lines. The result is that lesbian-ness is present, if only as a trace, in every episode of the book, even in the rather mundane, day-to-day moments; in fact, I would argue that these are the moments that we are specifically meant to read as "lesbian," since to do so normalizes lesbian-ness in the reader's mind. Lesbian-ness becomes mundane, everyday, something that is just there. I think that that is the lesson Mouré attempts to offer us by placing her poems under the overarching discursive construct of lesbian sexuality.

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Wednesday, June 16, 2004

The use of the term "we" throughout the previous section raises an important point: who is this "we"? In the way that I used it, especially in the final paragraph, "we" are implicitly straight; viewing the ideal audience as straight would validate the reading I offered, where Mouré is trying to educate the straight reader about her lesbian identity. However, it was extremely presumptuous to automatically assume that the text expects the reader to be straight; in fact, it makes more sense that the intended reader is lesbian, since these are "lesbian sex poems"—why shouldn't I assume that these poems aim primarily at an audience that already knows what a lesbian identity is? To put it bluntly, mightn't the text want to engage with members of the lesbian community?

There is no way of absolutely answering this question, but if I assume that the text expects the reader to be lesbian, then the reading I offered yesterday becomes rather obviously openly ego-centric. There's no reason to assume, after all, that Mouré's primary concern is to educate the white, male, heterosexual reader that I implied by my use of "we" (which, really, could just as easily have been "me"), except that I assumed that her primary concern would be to talk to white, male, heterosexual readers. Such an assumption is intimately tied up with notions of power, veiled through notions of normality and Otherness. The reading I offered yesterday positioned Mouré as an Other, as a voice of alterity, while my own subjectivity was positioned as normal. While it is not the first time that a reader positioned himself in such a fashion, it is a particularly limiting stance to take with *Pillage Laud*, because to do so is to not just position Mouré as Other, but to position her as Other within the realm of her text—I treated Mouré as an outsider, as a stranger to her own work. To unwittingly assume Mouré is an outsider within her own text is to limit her access to the authorial "I" in *Pillage Laud*, at the same time as my own subjectivity is implicitly given access to it. One consequence of this is that when I say that the text normalizes lesbian-ness what is really happening is that I am making lesbian-ness seem more "normal" by heterosexualizing it. As a reader, then, I am not adapting my own subjectivity in such a way that lesbian-ness becomes more familiar to me; instead, I am adapting lesbian-ness in such a way that it becomes more like what I already accept to be familiar.

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To investigate the authorial "I" in *Pillage Laud* is not as straightforward as I have just made it seem. One can't forget that the sentences that comprise the text were computer generated by the MacProse program. As the introduction states, "Pillage Laud [sic] selects from pages of computer-generated sentences to produce lesbian sex poems…" (n. pag.); it is important, I think, that the introduction places the action of selecting on the text itself, since it would be a very different thing to say that "Erin Mouré created *Pillage Laud* by selecting from pages of computer-generated sentences…." So there is from the start a distance between Mouré and the authorial position; indeed, if one were to take the introduction literally, *Pillage Laud* created itself without any external author, without Erin Mouré. The introduction places *Pillage Laud* itself in the authorial position.

Of course, this is all just a smokescreen, since Mouré wrote the introduction, thereby giving a false authority to the text and downplaying her own role in its creation. After all, Mouré is the person who selected which sentences to include, where to include them, how to order and place them, etc. Still, according to a possibly outdated notion of what it means to "write," Mouré did not write the sentences; MacProse composed them, not Mouré. What do readers do, then, when they encounter a passage such as

> That day I wanted to be two girls in a car
> Or that girl
> That car
>
> Her white pearl earring so base shimmered
> Making daylight a realm of incandescence
>
> I wanted to be that daylight
> It was night and an earring was enough for me (*Pillage Laud* 3)

We know that MacProse wrote these sentences, not Mouré. Are we to assume that the computer program thought these thoughts and felt these emotions? How can we attribute these words or what they mean to Mouré?

In a sense, what *Pillage Laud* does is expose the fictional nature of the authorial position in all texts. If we were not told that MacProse was used to generate these sentences, we would automatically assume that Mouré wrote them; if Mouré didn't tell us she didn't write them, she would have written them as far as the reader was concerned. Conventional education trains the reader to put her trust in the author, who, realistically, exists only in the mind of the reader. Once a text is sold, the author is nothing more than a name, a collection of letters, on the cover and title page; the reader assumes that the "Erin Mouré" who wrote *Wanted Alive* also wrote *Furious*, *WSW*, *Empire, York Street*, and *O Cidadan*, but there is no proof of this other than the author's name on the cover. The reader takes an unwitting leap of faith; what *Pillage Laud* does is force the reader to recognize that the author is always a creation of his or her own mind. Along these lines, it is absurd to really care who wrote or composed the lines, because it makes no difference to the reader's understanding of the words, phrases, sentences, etc. Moreover, it is also equally absurd to claim that Mouré didn't write these sentences merely because a computer program wrote them first; Roland Barthes states that "[The writer's] only power is to mix writings, to counter the ones with the others, in such a way as never to rest on any one of them. Did he wish to express himself, he ought at least to know that the inner 'thing' he thinks to 'translate' is itself only a ready-formed dictionary, its words only explainable through other words, and so on indefinitely…" (146). If we follow this logic to its inevitable conclusion, only the author of a book filled with neologisms and/or nonce words would qualify for the title *author*.

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Thursday, June 17, 2004

Pillage Laud offers several challenges to the perceived notion of "book." The most obvious challenge is, of course, the one to the author position and the subsequent re-definition of that position in the mind of the reader (see June 16); however, there are at least two other, more subtle challenges, one to the physical form of a book, the other to the production and marketing of a book.

The inclusion of the loose page that is to be inserted between the "Burnaby" and "Rachel-Julien sections" call into question the physical form of the book. This piece is not an errata slip, since it is a complete small poem that stands alone; it exists between the sections. Moreover, it is apparently not just a last minute addition to the text, since it appears in the table of contents under the title *"tout cela se passe à l'intérieur de moi-même, dans l'ample palais de ma mémoire"* ("all this happens in the interior of myself [inside myself], in the ample palace of my memory") and is given the designation "st.a." (which I believe means "stand alone") instead of a page number. This raises several questions: did Mouré decide to add this poem, or is it included because the MacProse somehow suggested such an inclusion in one of its sentences? is Mouré write (in the traditional sense) the piece, or did MacProse compose it, as MacProse originally did the rest of the text? what is the piece's title: is it the sentence offered in the table of contents, or, since this sentence does not appear on the page (except as a ghostly trace) is the title PL 7.1.0b? why, on the opposite side of the sheet, does the title "Her Insertion" appear? what does the shaded square, which is the same colour as the textless page 93, signify? Some thoughts on these subjects:

- The sheet might stand alone because it is Mouré's inclusion to *Pillage Laud*, a series of sentences she wrote herself. This would undo the challenge to the author position, but, at the same time, offer another challenge to it, since *Pillage Laud* would then be a text with two authors: a MacProse and Mouré hybrid author, and Mouré alone. The question we are still left with, though, is why did Mouré choose to include her own sentences? Was it from a perceived lack in the text, or a desire to gain a stronger say in the text? Or was it merely to disrupt the already disrupted notion of author in the text?
- If we assume that the "her" in "Her Insertion" is Mouré, the insertion could refer to the sentences, the textless square, or both. Mouré's insertion could be the absolute silence signified by the wordless square.
- The absence of a title—or more exactly, the over abundant choices for title, which leads to the inability to determine one true Title—signifies the hazy resonances that the sheet's inclusion holds, since it disrupts the physical nature of the book. A book, by its nature, is a bound collection of pages; to include a loose page both draws attention to the rigidity of the rest of the physical book while at the same time suggesting that such a rigidity is merely a by-product of

book production, not an essential component of a book. It draws attention to the difference between the book (a bound collection of pages) and the text (an ideal collection of words, phrases, letters, etc) and refuses to allow the two terms to be conflated, which is what happens in most traditionally bound books.

- The French possible title to the piece suggests that Mouré wrote at least that title, and the personal nature of that title should be highlighted: "all this happens in the interior of myself [inside myself], in the ample palace of my memory"; however, what is the "this" to which the line refers? Is it the complete text of *Pillage Laud*, or only the stand alone sheet? Is the title meant to privilege the stand alone sheet as somehow more personal—and thus more properly authorial—than the rest of the text?
- If the sentences on the sheet are more personal, what does it signify that of the six sentences only one is a complete thought: "Wanting is not a ligature, today"? Do the other five sentences, all incomplete, signify an uncertainty, a hesitation, in the production of a personally composed lesbian sex poem? Or am I reading these lines incorrectly, are they meant to be three sentences: If it weren't for her charisma I deferred to wanting is not a ligature, today. Her allure sends an arm to my entry… If to fascinate arrays me relentlessly even her erection in my blurred deafens her pudicity torques my pulse where I was leaning…? The use of punctuation (one terminal period at the end of the second line and ellipses at the end of the third and sixth lines) is indeterminate here; we can't decide for certain if Mouré intentionally left out the punctuation in lines one, four, and five, in which case it remains as a trace, offering an implied end to each of these lines, or if it is not intended to be there at all, which would blend the lines together.

The second challenge to the inherited notion of book concerns the production and marketing behind *Pillage Laud*. Moveable Type Books has, as far as I can tell, published only one book: *Pillage Laud*. I believe that Moveable Type is merely a company that Mouré created in order to publish this book, and so it is basically a self-published book. When I had a bookstore order in a copy for me, I was told that they had to order it directly from Mouré, and when my copy arrived it was signed by Mouré on the title page. All of this suggests that Mouré either decided to forego conventional publishing practises, or else publishers were uninterested in publishing this text; considering the status Mouré had (and still has) at the time *Pillage Laud* was released, I find it hard to believe that she couldn't have found a publisher, and so I suggest that she decided to publish it herself. To my knowledge, this is the only text Mouré has published, either of her own work or of someone else's. It is interesting to think that the text that in many ways is least Mouré's writing, due to the use of MacProse, is at the same time more her own than her other texts in terms of publishing. Moreover, the choice to self-publish also puts the distribution of *Pillage Laud* firmly under Mouré's control; she can offer it to as many or as few people as she chooses. For that reason, this book is the most difficult of Mouré's later works to purchase. George Hartley draws a direct relationship between the construction of the subject in poetry and the marketing of poetry: "Poetry, then, which functions according to the notion of the poet/speaker as an independent subject who, having 'found his voice,' presents a situation seen from a single point of view, fosters the key ideological concept of bourgeois society: the self-sufficient, self-determined individual free to participate in the marketplace…" (qtd in Lazer 66). It is interesting to note that it is in a text that necessarily undermines the notion of the stable subjectivity of the author that Mouré chooses to not participate in the marketplace, at least not to the normal degree or in the usual manner. By bypassing the publisher, Mouré has removed *Pillage Laud* from the conventional economic situation for books of poetry in North America; in a sense, she has become the publisher for MacProse.

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Friday, June 18, 2004

It is an important distinction that *Pillage Laud* is written, not by Erin Mouré, but, according to the cover and title page, by "Erin Mouré." The use of quotation marks around the author's name is more than just a whimsical joke; it is a visual hint at one of the central issues the text deals with: the construction of identity. The attacks on the author position that I mentioned above (June 16 and 17) question the construction of all identity, not just the author's. *Pillage Laud* is a text that does its best to dissolve all inherited notions of stable identity.

Roland Barthes, in his essay "The Death of the Author," argues that "writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin. Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing" (142). In particular, he links the notion of the author with the rise in the belief of the fundamental importance of the individual:

> The author is a modern figure, a product of our society insofar as, emerging from the Middle Ages with English empiricism, French rationalism and the personal faith of the Reformation, it discovered the prestige of the individual, of, as it is more nobly put, the 'human person'. It is thus logical that in literature it should be this positivism, the epitome and culmination of capitalist ideology, which has attached the greatest importance to the 'person' of the author. (143)

To argue backwards from this precept, any challenge to the perceived identity of the Author is also a challenge on the prestige of the individual. The quotation marks around Mouré's name announce the denial of any fixed identity to the author of *Pillage Laud*: what the quotation marks imply is that the author's name is merely a collection of letters, and, more so, that the author herself is nothing more than a construction of language. This goes beyond Mouré's use of MacProse to generate the sentences in the text; it calls into question the fixed, stable identity of all authors, no matter how "personal" or "impersonal" their texts may be. Mouré's use of quotation marks, which draws attention to the author as a linguistic construct, goes back to a tradition that Barthes sees extending back to Mallarmé, a tradition that views language itself as the author of all texts:

> In France, Mallarmé was doubtless the first to see and to foresee in its full extent the necessity to substitute language itself for the person who until then had been supposed to be its owner. For him, for us too, it is language which speaks, not the author; to write is, through a prerequisite

> impersonality (not at all to be confused with the castrating objectivity of the realist novelist), to reach that point where only language acts, 'performs', and not 'me'. (143)

Barthes argues that all texts, whether they be traditional or experimental, lack authors, because language itself (which includes linguistic constructs such as context and influence) that creates the texts. What Mouré does in *Pillage Laud* is not something terribly new, in the sense that the ideas behind it have existed for some time; what is new is the form of that these ideas take in the text: the use of computer-generated sentences, loose pages, quotation marks, etc. The unsettling aspect of *Pillage Laud* (unlike many experimental texts that ask similar questions about language and authorship) is that the reader can make sense of its sentences, since the text does not call signification into question. What is unsettling is that, though the text uses signifiers in a somewhat traditional manner, the signifieds are often missing or unfixed, especially the personal pronouns in the text. I would argue that it is through the personal pronoun more than any other signifiers that the reader sutures him/herself into the text; the appearance of "I," "you," "her," etc., when they have a relatively fixed signified position (when there is *someone* being referred to by the "I") allows the reader to situate himself as the signified being referred to by these signifieds. If, however, there is no stable author—through the use, for example, of an unfeeling, unthinking, unsubjectified computer to generate the sentences—the reader cannot suture herself into the text with any sense of safety or appropriateness. As a result, the reader is unable to truly invest himself—or any other subject positions—in the poems; moreover, the sexual aspect of the poems, due to this inability to emotionally relate to any individual, including herself, causes a detached, voyeuristic relationship between the reader and the text. The sexual subject matter becomes somewhat pornographic as a consequence. Take for example, this excerpt from the "Burnside" section:

> You achieved her. To write was the second,
> but to whip will establish the union.
>
> You had rushed.

After you furnish the outcome, I am so southern a glory.

What won't the slaves of clothing number?
There is an impediment in my regret.

Although so tight a vulva concerns the colonel of position,
to shout is her sequence.
Where velocity we taste, we were so excellent a harmony. (60)

Without the possibility of subject position, the reader is left to peek in at the acts being described, as opposed to truly imaginatively engaging in them.

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Barthes, one should note, would seem to disagree with the reading I have just offered. Barthes, when he removes the author position from a text, places that much more emphasis and freedom on the reader:

> Thus is revealed the total existence of writing: a text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader, not, as was hitherto said, the author. The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination. Yet this destination cannot any longer be personal: the reader is without history, biography, psychology; he is simply that someone who holds together in a single field all the traces by which the written text is constituted. (148)

In my reading, I would argue that *Pillage Laud*, while certainly offering the reader greater creative control of meaning than do more traditional texts, also severely limits the reader's ability to lose him/herself in the text. With this lack of narrative suture, I would argue that the reader never truly achieves the security within language than enables a deeper emotional connection with the text. Whether I am merely putting forth a new spin on the tired mind vs. heart debate is something else to ponder in all of this.

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Tuesday, June 22, 2004

Josef Ernst, in his article "Computer Poetry: An Act of Disinterested Communication," argues that computer poetry, through its lack of an author, does not qualify as communicative discourse. In particular, Ernst examines the output of *Racter*, a computer poetry generating program that seems very similar to the MacProse program that Mouré used to generate the sentences in *Pillage Laud*. Ernst argues that "The question of meaning, no matter if it [the poem constructed by *Racter*] is itself regarded as meaningful, will be frustrated by the piece since it circumvents the interest to communicate. *Racter* output presents itself as a mere reflection of the interest to communicate held by the original users of language. But it subverts this motivation through the ritualized aesthetic packaging of the product" (456). In other words, the computer poetry generating program merely mimics communication, and, as such, creates a type of a simulacrum of the author in doing so; the author is nonexistent yet the final product implies its presence. For Ernst, then, a computer-generated text is non-communicative whether the text is sensible, nonsensical, or complete gobbledygook because there is no personality behind it. Authorial intention to communicate is the necessary ingredient for communication to occur; if this intention is lacking, a text may look like it's communicating, sound like it's communicating, and even seem to be communicating—but it's not.

Ernst's argument, of course, is extremely conservative in terms of its notion of what is an author. For Ernst, the answer is quite simple: an author must have a personality; an author must be a person—otherwise, a text is meaningless:

> *Racter* poses the question whether the knowledge of who is the author of a certain piece limits its potential to generate interpretations. Many theoreticians have asserted that the interpretation of a text occurs on a highly individual level between the reader and the text. However, if the immediate biographical data of the author may be irrelevant to understanding a text, the human author him or herself in this context certainly is not. In the negative, the extreme of *Racter* as a nonexistent

> wordmonger thus points out that the human experience is tied to the traditions carried by individuals who, among other things, produce literary output. Their past or present experience provides a text with a rationale without which its meaning—or that of any other manmade product—would be indecipherable. (459)

What Ernst fails to recognize, and what Mouré (and others using computer poetry generators or other forms of aleatory means to create texts) intentionally plays off of, is that a text is made of language, not of intention. As Roland Barthes defines it, Ernst is still caught up in the belief of the author, while Mouré is concerned with the role of the scriptor:

> The Author, when believed in, is always conceived of as the past of his own book: book and author stand automatically on a single line divided into a *before* and an *after*. The Author is thought to *nourish* the book, which is to say that he exists before it, thinks, suffers, lives for it, is in the same relation of antecedence to his work as a father to his child. In complete contrast, the modern scriptor is born simultaneously with the text, is in no way equipped with a being preceding or exceeding the writing, is not the subject with the book as predicate; there is no other time than that of the enunciation and every text is eternally written *here and now*. (Barthes 145)

John Cage's mesostics, for example, the earliest of which were created without the use of a computer, but whose creation was completely mechanical, would presumably also not meet Ernst's requirements for having an author (since Cage was intentionally trying to downplay his own authorial ego), and would consequently be deemed non-communicative. But do Cage's mesostics lack communication? I believe Ernst would say they do; I would argue that is an absurd argument to make. Moreover, *Pillage Laud* would, according to Ernst, be non-communicative, which seems absurd; however, for Ernst, even a text that was created by an author using a computer-generated text necessarily abdicates authority to the machine, which results in a lack of communication: "Even the stitching together of prefabricated parts can only be done by an author who would, in the age of the computer, transform him/herself into an alienated assembly-line worker by doing this. The user of *Racter*, therefore, has, without realizing it, entered into a metadiscourse which begins and ends in submission to the machine" (Ernst 456). Perhaps this last point is the crux of Ernst's argument: he assumes that the user of *Racter* unwittingly submits to the machine; he fails to understand that many people, including Mouré in *Pillage Laud*, intentionally submit to the machine in order to challenge the rigid, reified notion of subjectivity that lies behind the conservative belief in the necessity of an author. In fact, Ernst manages to stumble across the primary argument for using a computer text generator, but he is unable to comprehend such an idea:

> It is thus useless for one person to explain his/her *Racter* output to another; when talking about it, people do not communicate over remotely tangible issues or interests. Their talk becomes ridiculous chatter, a reflection of the participants' submission to "nothingness"—that is to say, the disinterestedness *Racter* willy-nilly idealizes. *Racter*'s topic, therefore, is the compartmentalization of individuals from one another, and their alienation from their political environment. (457)

Because he is unable to believe or conceive that some people might want to focus on the compartmentalization of the individual, Ernst is unable to see the importance of non-intentional writing. A text such as *Pillage Laud* forces the reader to acknowledge the compartmentalization of all individuals in modern society by taking as its topic such an emotionally charged inter-personal interaction as sex and then denying the author and the reader any personal connection to the material by intentionally denying the existence of an author. Moreover, *Pillage Laud* implies that people are the "nonexistent wordmongers" that Ernst refuses to accept; Mouré's use of MacProse suggests that we are all merely passive inheritors of language, and that our subjectivity is formed and maintained not only through language, but by language. Ernst believes that subjectivity exists outside of and prior to language, while Mouré's text argues that subjectivity cannot exist outside of language. According to *Pillage Laud*, language itself is the active creative principle, not human desire; as the back cover of the text states, "The computer mystery is arising. / Might the core of verse park its hat?"

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In spite of my disagreement with the vast majority of what Ernst has to say, he does hint at a very valuable idea in relation to computer-generated texts. He states that

> *Racter* is programmed to conjugate verbs, to provide the correct antecedents for nouns and pronouns, and to determine the form of its own output. It fills in its self-generated sentence structures by searching through dictionary files containing about 2,400 words. The words are categorized by identifiers, strings of up to twelve characters, which define one word in relation to another. This thesaurus allows *Racter* to choose adjectives to match with nouns. (451)

Mouré describes the workings of MacProse in a very similar fashion: "MacProse is freeware designed by Charles O. Hartman as a generator of random sentences based on syntax and dictionary instructions internal to the program" (*Pillage Laud* 99). What this suggests is a very conservative use of language in the computer-generated text, since the computer program uses words according to a very strict, regimented (programmed) fashion: a noun must be used as a noun, an adjective as an adjective, a verb as a verb, and so on. Moreover, this also suggests that computer-based texts lack the ability to create new words. If we look at a passage chosen at random from *Pillage Laud*, we can see this conservative use of language:

> You were those apartments; we had measured her;
> and while a fiction shall differ, so undaunted a cloud
> mattered. Had you reported metabolism?
>
> The empire of voice will rule my design.
> Although so full-time a desire was the report, a trial
> transformed her dabbling detectives. (61)

While there is some unusual word choice, it achieves nothing more than an occasional non sequitur. Sentence structure, on the other hand, remains absolutely unchallenged, as does grammar. Moreover, the text leaves the act of signification unchallenged, since these signifiers have been programmed to maintain their standard signifieds. The only truly original moments in the text come about through the unusual juxtaposition of those signifieds.

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Wednesday, June 23, 2004

For all of the supposed challenges to the traditional author in *Pillage Laud* through the use of MacProse, Mouré remains, in the end, a conventional author due to her role as the selector of the text. It is Mouré who has chosen which sentences to include in the text, how to arrange those sentences, how many sentences to include on each page, how long each section will be, how each section will open and end, and how each section will appear on the page. For example, Mouré's decision to place some of the text in a box on pages 9 and 81, to overlay a text box on page 30 over other text, and to leave each verso page blank in the "Glorieta de Bilbao" section are only the most obvious authorial choices in the text. In fact, one can view the "to exist is reading" section which closes the text as an example of what an authorless passage of MacProse would look like: a solid page of text, running on without any paragraph breaks, any line breaks, or any white space to set up more obvious juxtapositions (even this section, though, is not authorless, as proven by the underlining of the sentence "When to exist is reading, can listener stop?" (97)). More importantly, it was Mouré who chose the "context words" for each section, words which determined what MacProse would search for and return with. Mouré fundamentally shaped the both the base text (the raw sentences MacProse output) and the final text of *Pillage Laud*.

In fact, what Mouré does in *Pillage Laud* is only slightly different from how any author writes a text; normally, an author chooses which words to combine, and continues adding and arranging words until s/he decides that the text is finished. All that Mouré does differently in *Pillage Laud* is relocate her primary level of authorial choice; instead of choosing what words to place in a sentence, she begins her writing at the level of the sentence, and then continues in a very standard fashion, ordering and combining sentences to create the effect she desires. Mouré treats sentences as her smallest elements of meaning in *Pillage Laud* in the same way most authors treat words as their smallest elements of meaning. At first, this might seem like a fundamental difference; after all, people usually treat words as the smallest unit of meaning—except, of course, when we think about it, they aren't—letters are. Authors, then, generally do not resort to working at the level of the smallest elements of meaning available to them; the vast majority of poets, for example, do not place their creative emphasis on combining letters together in order to create the text (concrete poets, sound poets, and early language poets are the obvious exceptions to this statement). The result of such a creative emphasis would be a text comprised almost completely of nonce words. Instead, writers ignore this level of linguistic creativity and work with inherited words as their basic building blocks of meaning. There is no reason, after all, for this to be considered the *normal* practice of a writer—except that this is how we treat language when we speak; standard oral communication generally also ignores the sub-word level of language. We speak in words, which we do not really consider to be a collection of sounds (though of course they are, as sound poetry proves); we hear someone speak words, and we think in words without paying attention to the words as words, as sounds, unless something happens to force us to take notice of this act of communication, such as when we encounter a different accent, or when a common language is unavailable. In this sense, Mouré's decision to work at the super-word level of language removes *Pillage Laud* from qualifying as either an oral or written text. However, it does not mean that *Pillage Laud* lacks an author; on the contrary, Mouré's role is very much that of an author—it's just that her role is different from the textual and oral authors we almost always see. To put it another way, Mouré does not remove the author from *Pillage Laud*; she merely redefines what an author can be and do. The challenges included to reified subjectivity call into question the author's subjectivity, but they do not deny the existence of an author; for example, then, the quotation marks around Mouré's name question her identity as a person, not her role as the author.

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Thursday, June 23, 2004

In some ways, *Pillage Laud* offers many of the same challenges and critiques that early language poetry does. Early language poetry worked at the sub-word level of language, creating texts that consisted primarily of nonce words.[62] The result is that these texts attack the notion of a fixed, reified subjectivity, while, at the same time, maintaining a very powerful author function. The overabundance of nonce words makes the text self-reflective to the point that the reader is again subservient to the author, since the reader cannot gain any intellectual "footing" in the text (Reinfeld 28-32). Along these lines, one could argue that *Pillage Laud* also places the reader subservient to the author (in this case, the author would be a hybrid of MacProse and Mouré), since there is no guideline buried in the text to inform the reader how s/he should make meaning from the text.

However, to read *Pillage Laud* in this fashion would seem to me to leave Mouré in a damned if you do, damned if you don't position: if she explains how to read the text, then she is the all-controlling author. At the same time, if she leaves the reader without any instructions, then Mouré pushes the reader outside of the semantic level of the text. Either way, Mouré would seem to have her challenges to subjectivity negated. Perhaps this is why she mentions in her introductory note, almost in passing, that *Pillage Laud* is a text of "lesbian sex poems"; this is a definition of the text for the reader's benefit, allowing the reader a firm base from which to read the text that follows, while downplaying as much as possible the authoritarian definition of how exactly to read the text.

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I think it is possible to read the relationship *Pillage Laud* has towards Language poetry in a much more important, and much more insidious fashion. First off, it is important to note the philosophical similarities between Mouré's text and Language poetry. The challenges that *Pillage Laud* offers to the unified subjectivity of the author, through the use of MacProse and other devices, show a concern with negating the reified notion of the Romantic author; taking Charles Bernstein to be a representative of the group, Linda Reinfeld argues that a similar concern is at the heart of the Language poets' aesthetics: "Bernstein does not accept the Romantic notion of poet as solitary creator: for him, both psyche and language exist only so far as they are social, and all forms of creation, of giving birth, require the efforts of more than one" (64-5). Mouré and the Language writers, then, locate creativity in the transpersonal, in the communal points that exist between individuals. Bernstein himself states that

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[62] Linda Reinfeld, for example, offers David Melnick's poem "Pcoet" as a representative work of "young" language writing.

> The idea of a private language is illusory because language itself is a communality, a public domain. Its forms and contents are in no sense private—they are the very essence of the social. One's 'private' writing is partly the result of a tradition and contemporary practice of such works, always mediated by a larger social production. The investigation or revelations of meanings relying only on one's private convictions and insistencies, one's ear and the measure one finds with it, is not an isolating activity but its opposite—the exploration of the human common ground. (qtd in Reinfeld 65)

I see a very similar notion in the way language works in the biography Mouré provides at the end of her text:

> **"Erin Mouré"** is a biological product in the usual state of flux,
> [containing
> organic and inorganic elements extending backward and forward
> in time, but tending as do all organisms toward homeostasis, in spite of
> entropic forces. **Erin Mouré** is an indicator of a social structure
> projected onto this organism. (*Pillage Laud* 99)

Mouré's biography suggests that language is a system that interpenetrates all individuals, and, consequently, like Bernstein's notion of the impossibility of a private language, language completely permeates the individual; the individual, like language, is also "in no sense private." There is a similar assumption between Mouré and the Language poets that language negates the possibility of a reified subjectivity, even though we consistently choose to believe that we are discrete, well-defined individuals.

Similarly, I believe that *Pillage Laud* agrees with and defends another of Language poetry's fundamental tenets: the hypnotic nature of conventional lyric poetry. Hank Lazer explains that "[Charles] Bernstein's claim is that so-called natural- or plain-style poetry hypnotizes its reader by discouraging or repressing any awareness of its own artifice and intellectuality, and that we find a different notion of reader and reading in the poetry of writers… [who] make certain that the construction of their work is not disguised" (Lazer 24). *Pillage Laud* goes out of its way to make known its own construction; there is no reason for Mouré to even mention her use of the MacProse program, except that she obviously wants to draw attention to the fact that the text *was* constructed. Whereas plain-style poetry (which I take to mean poetry that does not intentionally call language's accepted forms of meaning into question) attempts to hide (and thus to dismiss) its constructedness by suturing the reader into the text, *Pillage Laud* is very concerned with ensuring that the reader constantly realizes that the text was constructed, that it did not spring fully-formed from Zeus's brow. Marjorie Perloff offers another way of looking at the focus on the constructedness of the text: Language poetry "recognize[s] that 'I look straight into my heart and write the exact words that come from within' is, strictly speaking, impossible, for the 'exact words that come from within' are already coded by the historical and social context in which they function" ("The Word as Such" 234). The focus on the constructedness of the text is an attempt to make the reader aware of the constructedness of all texts (not just books).

However, in spite of sharing several key philosophical underpinnings with Language poetry, I believe that *Pillage Laud* (perhaps unwittingly) undoes some of the key challenges that some of the Language poets put forth. Specifically, Mouré's text maintains the conventions of grammar, which means that a key element of some Language poetry is undone. In particular, Steve McCaffery argues that grammar is "a repressive mechanism designed to regulate the free flow of language…. Grammar precludes the possibility of meaning being an active, local agent functioning within a polymorphous, polysemous space of parts and sub-particles; it commands hierarchy, subordination and postponement" ("Bill Bissett" 97-8), and that

> Grammar's law is a combinatory, totalizing logic that excludes at all costs any fragmentary life. It is clear that grammar effects a meaning whose form is that of a surplus value generated by an aggregated group of working parts for immediate investment into an extending chain of meaning. The concern of grammar homologizes the capitalistic concern for accumulation, profit and investment in a future goal. ("Language Writing" 151)

By retaining the conventions of grammar, then, *Pillage Laud* upholds the capitalistic drive inherent in more standard texts. *Pillage Laud* may look like Language poetry, and it may share some concerns with Language poetry, but it ignores something that is one of the most fundamental concerns for many of the Language poets: the normalization of capitalistic thinking in language. Moreover, Mouré's text at first glance could be mistaken for what Silliman calls the "new sentence," which is concerned with the sentence and also works paratactically. However, I would argue that Mouré's use of parataxis in *Pillage Laud* is merely the adoption of a style, without adopting the critical tenets behind that style. Ron Silliman argues that new sentence poetry limits the syllogistic movement from sentence to paragraph, and, as such, "keeps the reader's attention at or very close to the level of language, that is, most often at the sentence level or below" (91), in order to deny language's drive towards capitalistic accumulation. I would argue that Mouré adopts the style of the new sentence without adopting the principles behind it; the sentences in *Pillage Laud* do accumulate, at least partly because we the text provides the reader with an overarching subject for the text: they are lesbian sex poems. Consequently, we read everything in the text through the lens of this knowledge, which forces the sentences to work together, even though there might not be any explicit similarities or connections between the sentences.

The undoing of some of Language poetry's challenges and critiques also occurs in the way that *Pillage Laud* leaves the act of signification unchallenged. McCaffery again ties signification to the normalization of capitalism: "the linguistic promise that the signified gives of something beyond language i've [sic] come to feel as being central to capitalism (the fetish of commodity).... To demystify this fetish and reveal the human relationships involved within the labour process of language will involve the humanization of the linguistic Sign by means of a centering of language within itself" (qtd in Perloff, "The Word as Such" 233). To break the normalization of delayed gratification that lies at the heart of capitalism, the process of signification must be exposed as only one possible way of using language; signification must be shown to be something other than *natural*. However, *Pillage Laud* uses signification is in such a way that the words' referents are hardly ever missing.

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Friday, June 25, 2004

Continuing on from my thoughts from yesterday, why is it important that *Pillage Laud* mimics several important aspects of Language poetry without holding the same philosophical aesthetics of the Language poets? To answer that, I would like to turn to Paul Crowther's essay "Postmodernism and the Visual Arts: A Question of Ends." In this essay, Crowther examines the visual arts of the 1960s and 1970s, particularly the work of Malcolm Morley. Crowther determines that Morley's art offers a particular challenge to the inherited notion of what art is, but that those artists who followed him not only offered less of a challenge, but actually reappropriated his challenge:

> Indeed, whilst the common prejudices of the general public equate "good" painting with verisimilitude..., here the "good" painting is achieved by quasi-mechanical reproduction, rather than the virtuoso fluency of the skilled hand. Morley's Super Realism, in other words, is a critical practice which highlights, questions and thwarts our expectations of art as a "high" cultural activity. It addresses not so much the minimalist and conceptualist preoccupation with the minimum conditions for something to be counted as art, but rather the legitimizing discourse whereby art is justified as a vehicle of elevation and improvement.... However, the great bulk of work in this idiom has a much more superficial orientation. For, as the Super Realist tendency spread, it began to address itself to more traditional concerns and became

> simply a *style*. In the work of John Salt or Richard Estes, for example, we find close-up images of such things as cars of flashy shop frontages, which, whilst being derived from photographs, present themselves as ostensibly virtuoso performances. Super Realism becomes the means for intricate, aesthetically dazzling compositions on the grand scale. The work of Morley and the other innovators, in other words, is reappropriated within the legitimizing discourse. (186-87)

Crowther goes on to suggest that there are two phases to an experimental art movement: the critical phase and the uncritical phase:

> I am arguing, then, that there are two fundamentally different aspects to postmodernism in the visual arts. First, in the late 1960s and 1970s there developed a kind of art which is sceptical about the legitimizing discourse of art as a vehicle of elevation and improvement. Now, whereas radical modern movements such as Cubism and Surrealism redeploy traditional genres such as still life and fantasy as a means of elevating subjectivity, artists such as Morley and Keifer radically question the affirmative discourse of high art, as such. They do so either by incorporating (in an *apparently* unmediated fashion) that which is most *directly* antithetical to high art—namely, mechanically reproduced imagery; or by thematising (within the particular work) the inadequacy of artistic categories, and, indeed, art's inability to express the complexities and catastrophes of concrete historical experience. We have, in other words, a new form of art whose very pictorial means embody a scepticism as to the possibility of high art. By internalizing this scepticism and making it thematic within art practice, *Critical* Super Realism and *Critical* Neo-Expressionism give art a *deconstructive* dimension. Such work embodies the same kinds of strategy which inform contemporary poststructuralist approaches to discourse in general. They can, therefore, be defined as the definitive postmodern tendency. However, this deconstructive approach also created a market

> demand which was rapidly met by Secondary (uncritical) Super Realism and Neo-Expressionisms. These works served directly to reinvigorate the legitimizing discourse of art by tapping the traditional expectation of virtuoso performances and "profundity" and the modernist appetite for the odd and the outrageous. (188-89)

To take Crowther's useful ideas and terms and apply them to experimental poetry is not difficult. The Language poets offered a challenge to what they saw as the capitalistic drive in conventional poetry and to the belief that poetry should concern itself with mimesis; as such, it is, in its pure incarnation, a critical movement. What I am arguing about *Pillage Laud* is that it is a secondary, uncritical, spin-off of the challenges Language poetry offered; the text maintains the forms of Language poetry, but without the intentionally critical underpinnings behind the form. As such, Mouré's text not only ignores Language poetry's critiques, but it actually works to reappropriate the critiques, to render them as nothing more than an artistic style. What happens is that the parataxis used in Language poetry in order to challenge language's role in normalizing capitalism, becomes merely a literary device in *Pillage Laud*. For example, note the use of parataxis and fractured grammar in the poem "The elephant appears…," from Charles Bernstein's 1979 collection *Poetic Justice*:

> The elephant appears without the slightest indication that he is demanded.
>
> An infinite inappropriateness.
>
> Continually learning.
>
> It was simply a series I didn't care for.
>
> Small cupolas.
>
> A numbered pairing.

> Trail Off.
>
> Invasion of space. Name of cigarette.
>
> You can tell at any time. I get up for breakfast. You feel it is impossible to continue.
>
> Diffuses. There. Feel it.
>
> Terrible tedium.
>
> ABABABABABABABABABABABABABABABABABABABABAB AB.
>
> Some snoring.
>
> & regardless of their relation or that we were in some ways unnatural.
>
> Possible pictures.
>
> "So in what sense...?" (163-64)

Bernstein's poem calls into question signification, reference, sentence structure, communication, and meaning. Most of the sentences lack a subject, and there is no obvious connection or contiguity between the lines; the poem lacks an overarching meaning. However, in *Pillage Laud*, all that remains is parataxis as a style, a poetic convention:

> Do the documents face so international a choice?
> A crisis after the united response is the essay.

Fear—has each of us burst?
She who matched your neck trusted the curve.

Whom were the violets locking?
Her deck between a knee and these colonies: pitcher.

You achieved her. To write was the second,
but to whip will establish the union. (60)

The sentences are grammatically normal (in spite of their bizarre content) and complete, and, moreover, we constantly have a topic that we can force the sentences to connect through: these are lesbian sex poems. What we are left with is merely the creative use of a style. The result is that the reader comes to view parataxis as normal; it becomes a convention. Consequently, the appearance of parataxis in truly critical texts, such as Bernstein's, becomes viewed as nothing more than a convention when, in fact, it is much more.

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Monday, June 28, 2004

So far, it seems that I have generally been comparing Mouré's text unfavourably to Language poetry. An area where *Pillage Laud* can shine light on one of the hidden assumptions of Language poetry, is, however, the archive. Michel Foucault defines the archive as such:

> The archive is first the law of what can be said, the system that governs the appearance of statements as unique events…. The archive is not that which, despite its immediate escape, safeguards the event of the statement, and preserves, for future memories, its status as an escapee; it is that which, at the very root of the statement-event, and in that which embodies it, defines at the outset *the system of its enunciability*. Nor is the archive that which collects the dust of statements that have become inert once more, and which may make possible the miracle of their

> resurrection; it is that which defines the mode of occurrence of the statement-thing; it is the *system of its functioning*. (129)

For Foucault, then, language is an archive; specifically, the archive is that thing in language that determines the system of its functioning. I would define the archive of language as the group of rules and assumptions that we generally take for granted when we use language as a communicative device: signification, grammar, sentence structure, denotation, connotation, etc. Drawing attention to these rules is at the heart of Language poetry—these poets wish to draw the reader's attention to the materiality of language, and to force the reader to take note of the hidden, reified systems working within language that we normally overlook as a *natural* part of language. The desired result is that the reader will learn to see language as a construct, as a designed, created system, not as a transcendental, transhistorical code that exists apart from the physical world. However, the Language poets generally do not take into account their own position as authors in relation to the archive of language. By this, I mean that, in spite of their attacks on what they see as the reified aspects of language (signification, grammar, sentence structure, etc.), Language poets do not break away from the traditional relationship between author and language, which is the direct apprehension of the archive of language. Language poets, by attacking the reified constructs of language, unintentionally perpetuate the traditional, quasi-mystical powers of the author as prophet/seer; if they have the ability to alter the reified constructs, they also have the ability to see and use language at a higher level than the intended reader, who is left to follow the enlightened author.

At its basic level, I see the problem with this aspect of Language poetry as fundamentally tied to the notion of agency. Quite simply, the Language poets support the notion of authorial agency that has gone back at least as far as to the Romantics. Language poets choose their words carefully, which is the crux of the problem; so long as this element of choice is implicit or explicit in their work, they continue the notion that the writer has full access to, and command of, the archive of language. How else would they be powerful enough to determine and change the rules of the archive in their poems? The result is that, though they attempt to do away with authorial agency, this agency comes in—and with strengthened virility—through the back door, so to speak.

Mouré, on the other hand, manages to avoid strengthening the notion of authorial agency by foregrounding her own limited access to the archive of language; she does this through the use of MacProse, which chooses her words for her—all that Mouré can do is further limit what MacProse has already limited. Keeping in mind Mouré's use of MacProse, read Foucault's description of the archive working in language:

> Between the language (langue) that defines the system of constructing possible sentences, and the corpus that passively collects the words that are spoken, the archive defines a particular level: that of a practice that causes a multiplicity of statements to emerge as so many regular events, as so many things to be dealt with and manipulated. It does not have the weight of tradition; and it does not constitute the libraries of all libraries, outside time and place; nor is it the welcoming oblivion that opens to all new speech the operational field of its freedom; between tradition and oblivion, it reveals the rules of a practice that enables statements both to survive and to undergo regular modification. It is the general system of the formation and transformation of statements. (130)

The archive of language is without subjectivity, without cognition, without sentience—which is exactly what one could say of MacProse. *Pillage Laud* uses MacProse as a representation of the author's link to the archive of language; normally, this link is part of the author's agency—it's what constitutes her particular style and *way* with words. By focussing the reader's attention on the use of MacProse, Mouré highlights that she is not directly accessing the archive of language, but is only accessing a sub-archive of language that was created for her by the computer program: "Pillage Laud [sic] selects from pages of *computer-generated sentences…*" (emphasis added; n. pag.). The fact that the author does not have a pseudo-mystical link to the archive of language calls into question the author's agency over the text, a questioning that the Language poets wish to achieve but generally fail to do.

In this sense, *Pillage Laud* mirrors the stance towards the archive of language that John Cage takes in "Writing for the Second Time Through *Finnegans Wake*." Cage manages to set up a sub-archive through the use of aleatory methods on Joyce's text, the result of which he then chooses from to end up with his text. It is interesting to note that both Mouré and Cage create their text through a subtractive rather than a combinatory composition style; they both use a device to create a sub-archive, from which they can only remove words to create their own texts. This subtractive compositional style mimics and makes apparent the true connection between combinatory authors (whether they are conservative or experimental in terms of style) and the archive of language; since the combinatory author has access to all the words that s/he personally knows (or can find in a dictionary) the resulting text is always a matter of personal choice, which, intentionally or not, strengthens the agency and subjectivity of the author.

Of course, it must be acknowledged that both Cage and Mouré *chose* to create their texts through the use of a sub-archive. It could be argued, then, that their texts are no less a matter of personal choice (is it truly possible to choose to be subservient?); however, I disagree with this idea. I would suggest that, just as Cage constantly argued, the use of a sub-archive merely diminishes the author's ego/agency, it does not absolutely remove it. The point of the sub-archive is to draw attention to the authorial relationship to the archive of language and to modify, not destroy, that relationship.

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Tuesday, June 29, 2004

The use of a sub-archive of language, such as Mouré and Cage establish in their texts, might possibly suggest an answer to one of the most difficult questions in experimental writing: how can a writer avoid unintentionally strengthening the culture she criticizes merely by criticizing it? Stuart D. Hobbs, in his book *The End of the American Avant Garde*, draws a direct link between the critiques of society that experimental artists offered in their works in the 1940s and 1950s and the way society used these critiques to strengthen its hegemony:

> Under the leadership of MOMA Board of Trustees president Nelson Rockefeller, the international exhibitions organized by the MOMA

> especially highlighted the work of the abstract expressionists. These painters became weapons in the Cold War of ideas. Their themes of alienation and cultural renewal were deemphasized by MOMA curators, who presented the works as representative of the freedom of the non-Communist world. The cultural Cold War carried on by the MOMA was an unofficial continuation of previous government programs. (121)

The artists' critiques became proof of the openness and superiority of American society during the Cold War; as a result, the critiques that the artists offered unwittingly strengthened the ideological underpinnings of the society. Their critiques merely serve to show that America values difference, even when it is hostile to the status quo. America's allowance of the expression of diverging opinions creates its own plurality.

Obviously, the Cold War is over by the time that *Pillage Laud* appears. Still, there is a link between plurality and capitalism that provides a continuing theme connecting the work of the Abstract Expressionist painters and the Language poets. Commenting on the social critic Joseph Wood Krutch, Hobbs states that

> Totalitarians, said Krutch, describe people as machines—manipulable and devoid of feeling. Those who believe in freedom, however, look for their models in the natural world where, Krutch maintained, "every individual leads its own individual, unique, and rebellious life."... He argued that people's choices in taste and fashion were weapons in the [Cold] war: "The houses we live in,... the very decoration of our walls, proclaim where our sympathies lie and subtly influence our own convictions." In the design, in the choice of objects on the mantelpiece, Krutch declared, people could express their individuality and freedom. He denounced the dictates of official fashion for "subtly, if not consciously, attempting to deny that we are organisms rather than machines" and advocated the use of natural materials and a return to the humanistic and naturalistic heritage of the Renaissance. (119)

This quotation shows how eclecticism becomes a cultural requirement: it is an act of conformity, not of freedom, since it is socio-politically required. This also suggests that consumerism interconnects with the idea of freedom/individuality, that we can buy our own individuality at the local store. At the bottom of all of this is a belief in the fundamental importance of the individual subject, or, more precisely, in the absolute imperative that the *people* believe in the necessity and naturalness of individual subjectivity in a capitalist society, that the people believe that they are individuals who constantly express their individuality. And this is the link I see between Language poets and the Abstract Expressionists: both groups fundamentally believe in the individual subjectivity of the author/painter/creator, and, as such, normalize the concept of individuality and individual expression in a capitalist society. By maintaining the belief in their direct, individual access to the archive of language, the Language poets argue for their individual subjectivity and for the uniqueness of their use of language. The result is a cult of personality similar to, if somewhat lessened (due to the smaller audience), the one that formed earlier around the Abstract Expressionists.[63] Consequently, though they might intend to critique capitalist society, the Language poets unwittingly strengthen it by providing yet another example of virtuoso individual creation with each text, as each text is the result of a creative, implicitly individual subject.

The use of a sub-archive, however, suggests a possible way around this problem, a problem which has all too often been seen as a catch-22. Mouré is able to offer a challenge to the notion of individual subjectivity through her use of MacProse; MacProse performs the combinatory composing that requires a direct access to the archive of language, which removes Mouré from the position of author—at least the position of author as we inherit it, which is a position that privileges a unified, individual subjectivity, since *Pillage Laud* can in no way be construed as the result of a collaboration.[64] Due to the use of a sub-archive of language, it is impossible to consider the words of *Pillage Laud* to be Mouré's; instead, they are the words of MacProse. The result is that Mouré works within a tight constraint, unable to "speak" anything of her own ideas, desires, beliefs, etc., and this inability to speak expels the individual subject from *Pillage Laud.* With the individual subject removed, the text can no longer offer support for capitalism, which depends fundamentally on the creation and perpetuation of the belief in the priority of the individual subject.

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[63] Hobbs argues that "The model of artist as revolutionary leader heroically showing people the way to the future has been a standard one since the romantic period and was especially prominent in the age of the avant garde. In the twentieth century, the hero has been transformed into the celebrity. Personality has become the focus of presentation rather than ideas or accomplishments, which are often lacking for celebrities in any case" (151).

[64] I would argue that even traditional texts that are co-authored maintain a solitary author, since the voice that emerges from the text is not that of several people, but of one individual "mind," which is that of the collaborative whole that the people working together merge together to create.

One way to read *Pillage Laud*, then, is as a complete refutation of capitalist consumer society, since it refuses to acknowledge the centrality of the individual; *Pillage Laud* exposes the individual subject as a construct, similar to constructs such as gender, race, and religion. The text refutes the possibility of individual creation, since the sub-archive of language that it uses exposes how the entire archive of language conditions and subverts any author's attempt at *individual* creativity. In this way, then, *Pillage Laud* seems to achieve one of Language poetry's goals: to expose how language constitutes our perceptions of the world.

Pillage Laud, it would seem to me, cannot support the status quo, nor can it be made to support it, because the text exposes the artificiality of the supposedly *natural* subject under capitalism.

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Wednesday, June 30, 2004

In yesterday's entry, I argued that *Pillage Laud* did not support the status quo, by which I meant the *economic* status quo, that of capitalism. Setting this angle aside, one could also argue that *Pillage Laud* is very much a part of the *cultural* or *aesthetic* status quo of its time: postmodernism. Fredric Jameson argues that it is "essential to grasp 'postmodernism' not as a style, but rather as a cultural dominant; a conception which allows for the presence and coexistence of a range of very different, yet subordinate features" (64). Nevertheless, Jameson offers what he sees as the overarching tendencies within postmodernism; for him, one of postmodernism's most fundamental tendencies is the drive away from depth to depthlessness:

> Overhastily, we can say that besides the hermeneutic model of inside and outside which Munch's painting ["The Scream"] develops, there are at

> least four other fundamental depth models which have generally been repudiated in contemporary theory: the dialectical one of essence and appearance…; the Freudian model of latent and manifest, or of repression…; the existential model of authenticity and inauthenticity, whose heroic or tragic thematics are closely related to that of the great opposition between alienation and disalienation…; and finally, latest in time, the great semiotic opposition between signifier and signified, which was itself rapidly unravelled and deconstructed during its brief heyday in the 1960s and 1970s. What replaces these various depth models is for the most part a conception of practices, discourses and textual play…. [S]uffice it merely to observe that here too depth is replaced by surface, or by multiple surfaces (what is often called intertextuality is in that sense no longer a matter of depth). (70)

In particular, Mouré's use of MacProse, which acts as a sub-archive of language that limits her ability to actually *speak* in the text, removes her subjectivity from the text. What remains is a text with no psychological depth, due to the lack of a unified subject behind the words. In this sense, *Pillage Laud*'s lack of psychological depth means that the text is very much in tune with the depthless society around it, for, as Jameson argues, it is the lack of unified subjectivity that marks the shift from modernism to postmodernism:

> concepts such as anxiety and alienation (and the experiences to which they correspond, as in [Edvard Munch's] "The Scream") are no longer appropriate in the world of the postmodern. The great Warhol figures… these would seem to have little enough in common any more, either with the hysterics and neurotics of Freud's own day, or with those canonical experiences of radical isolation and solitude, anomie, private revolt, Van Gogh-type madness, which dominated the period of high modernism. This shift in the dynamics of culture pathology can be characterized as one in which the alienation of the subject is displaced by the fragmentation of the subject. (71)

Consequently, readers can view *Pillage Laud* as an exemplary example of the aesthetic status quo of its time.

The problem that rises from this differentiation between *Pillage Laud*'s relationship to its economic and aesthetic status quos is that many critics believe that there is no differentiation between these two modes of production, that the economic and the aesthetic are intimately linked, especially in the postmodern world. Jameson, for one, makes a strong case for seeing these two modes of production as inseparable in today's society:

> What has happened is that aesthetic production today has become integrated into commodity production generally: the frantic economic urgency of producing fresh waves of ever more novel-seeming goods (from clothing to airplanes), at ever greater rates of turnover, now assigns an increasingly essential structure function and position to aesthetic innovation and experimentation. Such economic necessities then find recognition in the institutional support of all kinds available for the newer art, from foundations and grants to museums and other forms of patronage. (65)

In Jameson's opinion, the creation of any new aesthetic style also creates the consumer's desire to own examples of that aesthetic style, which inevitably fuels the capitalist economy. For Mouré to further the use of MacProse as a sub-archive, then, is to create a demand for texts that do the same thing as *Pillage Laud.* Along this line of thought, to write at all, then, is to necessarily become part of the economic mode of production; as Ron Silliman argues, "The poet who writes with the idea of having her poems published, of having them collected into books and distributed through stores and direct mail purchases (which may at this point be the larger sector of the market), has inescapably been drawn into the creation of commodities" (21). This means that any poet selling her work, including Mouré, has turned her text into a commodity, a commodity that fuels the capitalist economy. Moreover, as Jameson suggests, seemingly non-economic aesthetic modes, such as poetry (which is, alas, notorious for avoiding as much as possible economic capital), can acquire other forms of capital, such as cultural capital; to complicate matters further, cultural capital often brings with it economic capital, in the form of grants or other supposedly merit-based exchanges. The result is that no text, it could be argued, escapes the economic mode of production of its time. A text like *Pillage Laud*, which attempts to criticize the economic mode of production in reality provides nothing more than a false rupture which in turn hides its own complicity with the system it critiques.

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Thursday, July 1, 2004

To suggest that *Pillage Laud* avoids being pulled into the capitalist economy because it denies the existence of a unified subject is to ignore the argument that the capitalist economy thrives off conflict. To offer the notion that the subjectivity of the author is fractured and un-definable, as Mouré's use of MacProse implies, enters that idea into the discursive economy, thereby rendering it part of that economy. The idea becomes part of what it was fighting against: the reified capitalism that depends upon the belief in individual subjectivity. This process happens because capitalism thrives on difference, on opposing viewpoints, in order to survive. Mouré suggests a revision to reified subjectivity, and, consequently provides a new idea with which capitalism can engage. As Paul Mann argues,

> Capitalism depends upon its ability to replace old commodities with new ones, to generate greater and greater demand for more and more products. Novelty itself would therefore seem to be a properly bourgeois value: hence to be avant-garde is already to be bourgeois precisely by one's commitment to innovation…. [T]he historical avant-gardes can now be seen… as agencies by means of which capital adapted the idea of the new for its own ends: the by-now-stereotypical figure of the avant-garde as a research and development bureau of the capitalist factory, a site where the new is both instrumentalized and evacuated. (68-69)

For Mann, this recuperative pull of capitalism is inescapable for any text, since the pull begins the moment anyone or any text discursively engages another: "Other cultures do not bother to recuperate their margins: they just eradicate them or wall them out. But in late capitalism the margin is not ostracized; it is discursively engaged. The fatality of recuperation proceeds not from any laws of nature but from dialectical engagement, the (never altogether conscious) commitment by any artist or movement to discursive exchange" (15).

Mann's notion of the inevitability of recuperation comes from his belief in the Hegelian dialectic. As Mann states, "For us the fundamental problem of the dialectic has been the very efficiency with which it manages the differences on which it depends; the dialectic overmasters the differential movements from which it is constituted, eroding their force until difference is barely conceivable" (115-16). Thesis, antithesis, and—inevitably—synthesis; this is the mantra that Mann believes in. But such a belief leaves absolutely no room for any truly marginal voice or idea; in fact, the more novel an idea or voice is, the more it is unconsciously complicit with and affirmative of the mainstream: "In the end it might turn out that there is not room left at all for the anti; all criticism is discourse, and discourse has no negative force that is not reduced to dialectical systems-maintenance. If this is the case, then even… the most antithetical movement is paradoxically, dialectically, the most affirmative…" (Mann 88). For Mann, then, the only possible stance that can bring about change is to remain silent, to withdraw from the discursive economy until it grinds to a halt from lack of new fuel. Oppositionality, then, only unwittingly supports what it opposes; capitalism would take *Pillage Laud*'s attack on unified subjectivity and incorporate it in such a way that it supported unified subjectivity. *Pillage Laud* could therefore be seen as the Other that the Self requires in order to define itself.

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However, a critique such as Mann's is, in many ways, extraordinarily conservative, since it downplays any oppositional voice as always already recuperated. Much like the title of John Cage's text "Diary: How to Improve the World (You Will Only Make Matters Worse)," any attempt at change will necessarily backfire, according to Mann. The only logical response to such a theory is acquiescence—which is the problem for a leftist critic like myself.

Although I think Mann makes a persuasive argument for his ideas, an argument that, to be honest, I cannot defeat through logic, I choose not to believe his argument. Instead, I choose to believe that evolution can take place within the system, that the system's need to incorporate oppositional voices necessarily allows for the possibility of change.

Moreover, I choose to turn to Jean-François Lyotard's notion of the sublime, that which escapes definition. Lyotard states that

> The aesthetics of the sublime is still more indeterminate: a pleasure mixed with pain, a pleasure that comes from pain. In the event of an absolutely large object — the desert, a mountain, a pyramid — or one that is absolutely powerful — a storm at sea, an erupting volcano — which, like all absolutes, can only be thought, without any sensible/sensory intuition, as an Idea of reason, the faculty of presentation, the imagination, fails to provide a representation corresponding to this Idea. This failure of expression gives rise to a pain, a kind of cleavage within the subject between what can be conceived and what can be imagined or presented. But this pain in turn engenders a pleasure, in fact a double pleasure: the impotence of the imagination attests *a contrario* to an imagination striving to figure even that which cannot be figured, and that imagination thus aims to harmonize its object with that of reason — and that furthermore, the inadequacy of the images is a negative sign of the immense power of ideas. This dislocation of the faculties among themselves gives rise to the extreme tension (Kant calls it agitation) that characterizes the pathos of the sublime, as opposed to the calm feeling of beauty. At the edge of the break, infinity, or the absoluteness of the Idea can be revealed in what Kant calls a negative presentation, or even a non-presentation. He cites the Jewish law banning images as an eminent example of negative presentation: optical pleasure when reduced to near nothingness promotes an infinite contemplation of infinity. Even before romantic art had freed itself from classical and

> baroque figuration, the door had thus been opened to inquiries pointing towards abstract and Minimal art. Avant-gardism is thus present in germ in the Kantian aesthetic of the sublime. However, the art whose effects are analysed in that aesthetics is, of course, essentially made up of attempts to represent sublime objects. ("The Sublime" 250)

I choose to view Mouré's reconfiguration of the subject, her rejection of fixed, individual subjectivity, as an attempt to move the subject into the realm of the sublime. Mouré makes the subject seem strange and un-definable, and, as a result, the reader's relationship to this new subjectivity is similar to our relationship with the sublime: fear, awe, pleasure, and a feeling of beauty. What this relationship requires is that the definition must always escape containment, it must maintain an aspect of the unknowable. In such a way, the sublime does maintain a silence that escapes the discursive economy that Mann believes to be all-encompassing. In this sense, *Pillage Laud* offers not so much a re-definition of subjectivity, but instead an un-definition of subjectivity.

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Friday, July 2, 2004

Although *Pillage Laud* is more an experimental than an avant-garde text,[65] I believe it carries forward many of the ideas and techniques of the avant-garde. It also exposes several shortcomings in critical opinions on what the avant-garde was and did. For example, Renato Poggioli, in his landmark study *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, states that

> At least theoretically, it is not… [liberal-bourgeois] society against which the avant-garde means to react, but against the civilization it creates and represents. The specific historical reality it opposes is just this mass culture, seen as a pseudo-culture. Faithful to qualitative values,

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[65] I follow Austin Clarkson's distinctions between the two categories here; in his article "The Intent of the Musical Moment: Cage and the Transpersonal," Clarkson argues that Cage's music is experimental, in that Cage sets formal parameters in place and attempts to find out what text results from those parameters, whereas avant-garde artists have a specific goal they want their texts to achieve (66). Consequently, experimental texts are the chance outcome of a formal experiment, while avant-garde texts are the textual realization of the artist's intended goal.

> the artist facing the quantitative values of modern civilization feels himself left out and rebellious. This state of mind also has practical social consequences, but above all it provokes a particular pathos in the soul of today's artist. He knows that in other times the artist, even if he was infinitely less free, never felt himself so much a derelict, rejected and isolated. Hence his dreams of reaction and revolution, his retrospective and prophetic utopias, his equally impossible desire to inaugurate new orders or to restore ancient ones. (108)

For Poggioli, this state of alienation lies at the heart of the avant-garde movement; it would also seem to apply to any traditionally experimental artists (such as the Language poets), who maintain a belief in the author's individual subjectivity, and who would almost necessarily suffer from being "faithful to qualitative values." What Mouré's text offers is a different way to look at this state of alienation, and to expose it as a hold-over from at least the Romantics, since it fundamentally requires a belief in individual creative prowess, and also a belief that this individual creative prowess is under-appreciated. The lack of a unified, individual authorial subject in *Pillage Laud*, I would argue, means that it is impossible to attach a state of alienation to the text. The text just *is*; it does not attempt to support qualitative values. In fact, I would say that it is possible to argue just the opposite, that *Pillage Laud* supports the mass-culture, and the chaotic and fragmentary subjects that mass culture creates[66], as a worthy part of artistic society. By using MacProse to choose what it can say, *Pillage Laud* supports quantitative values by refusing to place some ideas or words above others.

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Peter Bürger's study of the avant-garde moves away from Poggioli's focus on the authorial subject and looks at how the avant-garde movements challenged and critiqued society. Specifically, for Bürger it is the critique against the institution of art that is the fundamental aspect of the avant-garde:

> The European Avant-Garde movements can be defined as an attack on the status of art in bourgeois society. What is negated is not an earlier

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[66] Please refer to footnote 33 for an explanation of what I mean by "fragmentary subjects."

> form of art (a style) but art as an institution that is unassociated with the life praxis of men. When the avant-gardistes demand that art become practical once again, they do not mean that the contents of works of art should be socially significant. The demand is not raised at the level of the contents of individual works. Rather, it directs itself to the way art functions in society, a process that does as much to determine the effect that works have as does the particular content. (49)

Pillage Laud continues on with this downplaying of the contents of the text; in many ways, it doesn't matter what the text says, since if MacProse had arbitrarily offered different sentences, the text would be different without changing the overall meaning or challenges of the text. Instead, the text privileges the challenge to the notion of the unified individual subject. This challenge to individuality, according to Bürger, is also an important aspect of the avant-garde: "the avant-garde's reply to [individual creation] is not the collective as the subject of production but the radical negation of the category of individual creation. When Duchamp signs mass-produced objects (a urinal, a bottle drier) and sends them to art exhibits, he negates the category of individual production" (51). However, while I consider *Pillage Laud* to be continuing the work of the avant-garde movements, there is a distinct change from the avant-gardistes' explicit explanation of their goals and methods to an implicit, hidden agenda in Mouré's text. As Bürger states, the avant-gardistes were very careful to explicitly state their agendas to their audience:

> It is no accident that both Tzara's instructions for the making of a Dadaist poem and Breton's for the writing of automatic texts have the character of recipes. This represents not only a polemical attack on the individual creativity of the artist; the recipe is to be taken quite literally as suggesting a possible activity on the part of the recipient.... But such production is not to be understood as artistic production, but as part of a liberating life praxis. This is what is meant by Breton's demand that poetry be practiced (*pratiquer la poesie*). Beyond the coincidence of producer and recipient that this demand implies, there is the fact that

> these concepts lose their meaning: producers and recipients no longer exist. All that remains is the individual who uses poetry as an instrument for living one's life as best one can. (53)

I believe that *Pillage Laud*, while avoiding any explicit arguments or explanations, is very much concerned with offering an example to the reader of poetry as a praxis. Through the use of MacProse, Mouré becomes as much (if not more) a reader of the text as an author. *Pillage Laud* is the result of a creative interpretation by Mouré of MacProse's text. Similar to Cage's "readings through" poems, *Pillage Laud* provides readers with an example of what texts can accomplish through a creative engagement with the surrounding world of ideas. In this sense, the text perpetuates the ideas of the historical avant-garde movements while avoiding their methods. The reader of *Pillage Laud* must seek out this implicit argument, which means that it is possible to overlook it; however, I believe that the subtlety of argument in *Pillage Laud* means that its message, if the reader discovers it, is less likely to fall on deaf ears than the historical avant-garde's explicit argument.

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Saturday, July 3, 2004

Richard Murphy offers a valuable insight into experimental texts like *Pillage Laud*; he states that

> Marcuse maintains that, like religion, art has the positive function of preserving society's unfulfilled ideals and "forgotten truths." It thus contains an important critical element: it protests against the deficiencies of a reality in which these ideals have disappeared. But on the other hand, in as far as art serves to compensate in the realm of aesthetic illusion… for these real-life deficiencies, it simultaneously sublimates and defuses this protest. Paradoxically then in preserving life's unfulfilled ideals art may take on a quietist and "affirmative character" in as far as it serves merely to stabilize and legitimize that reality against which it protests. (8-9)

For Murphy, then, critical art acts like Bakhtinian carnival, which is more of a false rupture than a true force for change. How do we reconcile this notion with a text like *Pillage Laud*? For all of my arguments that Mouré's text points out the fictionality of the unified individual subject, I can still refer to these arguments as things that "I" pointed out. Whether this suggests a complicity inside *Pillage Laud* itself or an inability on my behalf to fully engage with the text's arguments is hard to say; however, I don't think I am the only reader who would react this way.

Perhaps in the end it is enough that *Pillage Laud* raises the issue of reified subjectivity for the reader; after all, it is impossible to think that one book of poetry could truly undo years of personal belief and implicit and explicit societal pressure, all of which is constantly working to prove the naturalness of the individual in society. In this sense, *Pillage Laud* again reflects Murphy's characterization of the avant-garde:

> In a sense then, the avant-garde's attack is directed more than anything else against the *bourgeois construction of social reality* in all its guises.... [The avant-garde] deconstructs the very notion of "rationality" as well as the distinction between "inside" and "outside"—the difference on which is based the illusion of an exterior, framing and transcendental perspective, and the myth of an all-powerful "meta-language." (261)

In this sense, the point is to raise the issue, to ask the question that has so long been ignored. Leaving the reader with this question is, perhaps, the most successful aspect of the many challenges *Pillage Laud* offers.

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Chapter Six

"because we do not know does not mean we are lost":

Fred Wah's "Music at the Heart of Thinking"

Monday, July 5, 2004

From the beginning, "Music at the Heart of Thinking" announces its concerns with its own cultural hybridity:

> The notion underlying *Music at the Heart of Thinking* comes from a Chinese movie I saw in Japan several years ago. It was a martial arts film about the Shao Lin monks in China. One of the monks would practice his tai chi while drunk so he could learn how to be imbalanced in the execution of his moves without falling over. In real battle his opponents were confused by his unpredictability. I've tried to use the same method in these pieces, sans booze of course. This method of composition is the practice of negative capability and estrangement I've recognized for many years, through playing jazz trumpet, looking at art, and writing poetry. I've tried to use it here in a series of improvisations on translations of and critical writing about contemporary texts and ideas. (*Music*; n. pag.)

Chinese martial arts viewed by the author while in Japan, with connections made to the English Romantics (John Keats's negative capability), the Russian Formalists (Victor Shklovsky's *ostranie*, or "making strange," estrangement), and African American culture (jazz). Philosophy and religion, visual art, poetry, and music, critical and creative writing are also purposefully mixed together. The result is a text fascinated with the crossing of any possible border; the pieces in the "Music" series are themselves "translations of and critical writing about" other texts, and thus work in conjunction with other writers; verse and prose poems are used interchangeably, seemingly at Wah's will; grammar appears and disappears throughout the sequence. The very first piece we encounter again highlights the desire to cross over borders:

> Don't think thinking without heart no such separation within the acting

> body takes a step without all of it the self propelled into doing the thing
> (say, for example, the horse) and on the earth as well picking up the
> whole circuit feet first feel the waves tidal and even outside to moon and
> sun it's okay to notate only one of those things without knowing fixed
> anyway some heart sits in the arms of (*Music* 1)

Without grammar, it is impossible to completely fix these words, and so they spill into each other, blending phrase into phrase: do we read it as "Don't think. Thinking without heart, no such separation within the acting body."? no, because "body" obviously belongs to "takes a step." Is it "Don't think thinking without heart. No such separation within the acting."? Perhaps, but the reading eye wants to combine "acting" and "body," and so we are confronted with our first crossed border; we read it both ways at once, acknowledging that there is a border between the words, but still reading over it. A permeable border, not erased but held in abeyance, the content of the piece mirrors the form: there is no thinking (mind) without heart (emotions), the border between these two states is overpowered by their existence in the same individual, and the individual permeates and is permeated by the entire world surrounding her/him. Rhythm, emotion, and thought: music, heart, and thinking.

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It is tempting to read Wah's embracing of hybridity through a biographical lens, since Wah is the product of a mixed marriage: a part Chinese father and a part Swedish mother. Certainly, Wah acknowledges his seemingly almost genetic pre-disposition to view language through the eyes of race: as he states in his essay "Faking It," "he [Wah's father] faked it, and I guess I picked up on that sense of faking it from him, that English could be faked, and I quickly learned that when you fake language you see everything else is a fake" (13-14). So it seems that the early awareness that his father was uncomfortable with English has had a lasting effect on how the younger Wah views both language and the world around us that language allows us to communicate with. However, it would be extremely limiting to argue that it is only Wah's racial background that influenced his interest in hybridity, in the crossing of borders, since so many of Wah's poetic and critical forerunners were also fundamentally interested in these concepts. The same connection that Wah found between his father's use of language and the fakeness or unnaturalness of the world, for instance, can also be found in Wah's readings of other, "white" poets: "'You tell the truth the way the words lie,' Robert Duncan had admonished us as young writers" (14).

Moreover, this connection between language and falsity grew into a fully-formed aesthetic stance for Wah, an aesthetics that drew on much more than his personal racial background. The result of this combining of different ideas on hybridity is that Wah comes to see language as openly false for every person, not just those children of mixed marriages or immigrant parents:

> So I took to the poem as to jazz, as a way to subvert the authority of the formal, as a way to sluice out "my" own voice for myself.
>
> But the more I wrote the more I discovered that faking it is a continual theatre of necessity. No other way to be in language, but to bluff your way through it, stalling for more time. And when I get it, that little gap of renewal, I see the accent not in my own little voice but there in the mouth of the word within the word, there in the "land only of what is," right there at the tips of our fingers, in the "sniff" of the pen as it hunts the page. ("Faking It" 16)

For Wah, there is something in language itself that maintains an otherness, an otherness which all speakers, no matter their race, age, or gender, must fake their way through. The end result of this faking, this inability to comfortably situate yourself as a master of language, is that people generally relate to language in the same way, whether they are of "mixed" or "unmixed" racial background. Through our inability to completely relate to language, then, Wah sees the possibility of moving past our individual upbringings and establishing a deeper, shared humanity, one rooted in our common relationship of estrangement to language and to the world that surrounds us.

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Tuesday, July 6, 2004

In his original note to the first ten entries in "Music," Wah states that "The following 'drunk' writings are notes for talk. In the explication of these estranged pieces lies possible coherences for some sense of writing as a notation for thinking as feeling. The difficulty is literal and intentional. I'm wary of any attempt to make it easy…" (*Music*; n. pag.). I would read this not only as a statement of Wah's personal aesthetics, but as a warning that every academic dealing with "Music" should embrace. Instead of attempting to explicate the pieces of the sequence so that they are "understandable" (with that term's connotations of logical correctness and reification), the critic should restrain from offering the limited and limiting readings that logical understanding requires. However, there is a loophole to this commandment; Wah goes on in the same note to say that "At any point at least 'two' are possible, many are probable" (n. pag.). One reading of a passage is a limiting reading, but two or more readings of the same passage opens the reading up to multiplicity.

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There is a premium placed on interpenetration in "Music," a penetration between all things due to permeable borders. In particular, there is a theme throughout the early pieces of mapping the individual's place through her/his connections with the surrounding world. We can see this mapping in the fifth entry, where the fish is "put there to indicate nothing necessarily but its own possible dimensions from everywhere else that it simply participate in the flow fish as vector of some platonic creek…" (*Music* 5). It is important to note that the mapping that occurs here is both a mapping of the individual through its relationship with its surroundings as well as a mapping of the surroundings through their relationship with the individual; it is a mapping of both sides of the equation at the same time, which necessarily implies that both sides of the equation are constantly in a state of flux, or re-definition. In this sense, the world Wah displays in "Music" is quite similar to a world defined through Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, where the act of looking, of measuring/defining, constantly changes the measurement/definition. Consequently, in such a fluid world, it is not the definition (fixed, reified) that matters, but the *act* of definition (ongoing, uncontainable). What this means is not that definition is impossible, or that each definition is incorrect, but that a definition is correct only in the particular moment that the reader determines it; each definition is constantly updated.

What this constant awareness of redefinition requires is a never-ending conscious and unconscious awareness of the individual as a perceiving instrument. Take, for example, the fourth entry in "Music":

> To take apart the tree bark by bark and burn it up top to keep the skin spread open to the air that moves through the world-tree message seems unnoticeable capable to the area over which limbs cover all those upright configurations for the connection between branches and roots likewise any surface to depth genetics provides unmentionable because invisible soundings taken quickly re the mouthings of the trembling body another language like French might place elsewhere simple as tongue there is after all the reaching for the water, reaching for the sun (*Music* 4)

This constant need to be aware of the skin as a perceptive organ is something Wah takes from Charles Olson's notion of proprioception, which Olson defines thusly:

> PROPRIOCEPTION: the data of depth sensibility/the 'body' of us as
> object which spontaneously or of its own order
> produces experience of, 'depth' Viz
> SENSIBILITY WITHIN THE ORGANISM
> BY MOVEMENT OF ITS OWN TISSUES ("Proprioception" 181)

For Olson, the body is a perceptive organism, perceptive both of the external world but also of the internal mechanism of the individual's body. This is the interpenetration of the individual and the external world. Wah continues to uphold the notion of proprioception, apparent through the interplay of tree and air, which together create the "world-tree message"; this message is the product of both conscious and unconscious responses between the individual tree and the external world, and, as such, it exists outside of language, since it can never be completely expressed ("unmentionable because invisible soundings taken").

Wah adapts this notion by focusing on the importance of language in the outcome, in the product of proprioception in a way that Olson overlooks. Wah investigates how language works in the production of proprioceptive meaning, while Olson ignores that aspect. Consequently, Wah argues that language does play an important role in the creation of meaning: to speak French, he implies, is to move the tongue in a very different way than to speak English. Since the body is the area of proprioceptive meaning, the different movements each language requires will result in a different bodily relationship with meaning. However, the awareness that people share a common relationship to the world that exists outside of the linguistic realm mitigates this difference: "there is after all the reaching for the water, reaching for the sun." The end result for Wah is a recognition that language is another permeable border between individuals; it is an area of difference, but it is a difference that is merely another variable to be taken into account when defining the "vector" between the individual and his/her surrounding world.

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It is interesting that, in spite of the importance I have just given to the role of language in determining the individual's relationship to the world, Wah has used two non-linguistic images to express the interpenetrative definition between the individual and the world: a tree swaying in the wind, and a fish in a creek. Both creatures completely lack language (in a way that other natural creatures—dog, cat, whale, bird—do not), and, as such, remain somewhat external to the linguistic definitions I have just argued for. Several conclusions could be reached as a result of this disjuncture:

- I am incorrect in my belief that Wah thinks language is an important element in the definition of an individual's relationship with the world.
- Wah has unwittingly chosen two images that undermine the importance he wishes to place on language in defining this relationship.
- These images are examples of otherness, of different linguistic codes from what we would normally define as language (the exchange of information between branch and air, between root and branch, between fish and stream as non-linguistic languages).

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Thursday, July 8, 2004

It strikes me that there is a problem with Wah's notion that "Music" is a "series of improvisations…" (*Music* Preface): can writing allow for a truly improvisational moment? As I would think of it, an improvisation would be tied to ephemeralness; a jazz improvisation, for example, would only be truly improvisational in the moment it occurred—if it is recorded, then all subsequent playings of the recorded performance would not qualify as improvisation, because the recording has fixed the performance in place. This does not take away from the technical skills or brilliance of the performance, but it does remove the performance from the realm of improvisation. I would define the truly improvisational work of art as something that can only be experienced once by both the performer and the immediate audience. A written text, which is essentially fixed and permanent once it is written down, cannot allow for the truly improvisational moment; even if we believe that the author in no way revises or reworks the piece after the moment of its original composition (which is the author's moment of improvisation), the fact that the page exists in a static, reified permanence for the reader, which allows for re-reading and doubling back in the text, means that there is no improvisation for the reader.

However, Wah's texts in "Music" maintain the illusion of the possibility of improvisatory reading. The primary tool Wah uses to maintain this illusion is the omittance of grammar, which supposedly opens up each piece to multiple possible readings, such as in this piece:

> Preact the mind ahead of the writing but stop to think notation of the mind ahead of the writing pretell the "hunt" message doesn't run like the wind simile makes it the belief of the wild imagination or trees or animals too to preface up the head ahead but notice the body as a drummer preacts the hands to do to do insistent so it can come out tah dah at every point simply the mind at work won't do or the body minding itself thinking (which is why the drum's cedar) get it right or get it wrong just strike from the body falling back thoughts felt behind to the notes sometimes gives it shape or thought as body too my drum tah dum (*Music* 2)

Although the subject matter dealt with here argues for an improvisatory writing style similar to how a drummer plays, the implicit argument is that the reader, through reading the "improvised" prose poem, can connect with this improvisatory realm of mental creation. The realm is apparently similar to but distinct from the subconscious mind, since the person must begin by thinking ("preact the mind") but then leave the mind behind; what Wah suggests is that the improvisatory realm is equivalent to a kind of muscle memory, where, through exercise/rehearsal, the body can create without specific impetus from the mind—it is a sort of trance-like state that can be achieved through repetition and practice (the most obvious comparison I can draw is to sports, where, by constantly practicing the correct response, the player will automatically react correctly in a certain situation without consciously thinking about what to do). In this sense, "Music" presents itself as a kind of guidebook to improvisatory writing and reading—writing because many pieces explicitly mention the act of writing, but reading as well, since the implicit thought in the text is that the reader must also be able to "preact" the mind while reading Wah's supposedly limitless, unformed prose. The hidden suggestion, then, is that "Music" achieves true improvisation; however, the pieces don't in fact achieve an improvisatory reading, for several reasons: the absence of grammar, while it does open up several possible readings for each piece, is in fact undone by the reader's bringing to bear his/her own grammatical choices/interpretations to the text (and so grammar remains as a ghostly presence, a trace, throughout the text, since it is never completely absent); the reader can read and re-read the text as often as s/he chooses, which will likely eventually fix and reify certain reading choices; the words are fixed on the page, which allows for only a limited number of choices in terms of each word's meaning.

Perhaps the main reason that Wah cannot de-grammaticize his text is the medium in which it appears. The page remains static, which allows the reader the opportunity to read and re-read the text until s/he can mentally insert the missing grammatical marks. If "Music" were to appear in another medium, say as a hypertext poem that slowly appeared and disappeared word by word, the reader would not be able to form the mental phrases and clauses in his/her mind.

The result is that "Music" does not achieve the emancipatory improvisation that it claims. In fact, all that Wah's pieces offer is a new form of reading, slightly altered from traditional forms (the absence of grammar is not, in and of itself, enough to radically alter our reading practice). Once the reader adjusts to the demands Wah places on her/him, the pieces can become as codified and fixed as texts that follow the conventions of grammar. In this sense, one can view "Music" as a carnivalization of the de-grammaticised text, as an example of what Paul Mann refers to as the "avant-colony," where "The culture industry uses its vanguard to remap the foreign as a margin, a site comprehensible only in relation to itself. Elsewhere becomes colony, an arena of overproduction and underdevelopment for an imperial appetite that can assimilate and reproduce nearly every sort of exotica" (Mann 79). By opening up the de-grammaticised text, Wah has not exploded the rules of grammar, but merely expanded them; by maintaining a recognisable sentence structure within each piece (which requires that the reader merely "plug-in" the missing grammatical marks) Wah unwittingly exposes how naturalized grammar has become in our reading process. Instead of achieving improvisation, "Music" reaffirms how necessary grammar is to the production of meaning in a written text.

What all of this suggests is that Wah underestimates just how ingrained grammar is for both himself and for his readers. Merely refusing to use the grammatical marks is not enough to free a text from the rules of grammar; instead, by forcing the reader to mentally insert the missing grammatical marks, "Music" suggests that grammar is an integral part of linguistic meaning, a part that can never be truly done away with.

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Friday, July 9, 2004

The relationship between memory and experience is one of the most important recurring themes in "Music." In particular, memory is most often viewed negatively in "Music," as something that promotes and upholds reification and thus distances the person from true experience or true meaning. The eighth piece, for example, contains this view of memory:

> Prevention of the feeling out by previous sets "I" gets enclosed again
> except by stealth to find the point where Harrison says dromenon pre-

> tells the story story being dangerously easy to repeat (all the time) but "L" or "P" like Nicole in her book or even the bible are new once just about accidental why stumbling is not taught in the court everyone else believes in animals too to fake it that writing just like Shao Lin under the moon the drunk dance… (*Music* 8)

Here, story represents memory, since story requires memorization in order to be retold; consequently, story is "dangerously easy to repeat," dangerously easy to shift away from being an experience to being a memorized, and thus reified, set of facts. Throughout, "Music" privileges experience over memory, and this piece noticeably prefers the stumbling accident, the faking it of the drunk dance of writing, over the "previous sets" of story that enclose the subjective "I." There is a need to keep the story fresh, to constantly be creating the story, as opposed to merely retelling the story. This is why it is important to remember that "even the bible [was] new once": if people constantly recreated a story, it avoids the dull reification that has befallen the Bible in our culture (which causes people to mistake it for factual, literal Truth, as opposed to mythic, or creative, truth).

Wah's reference to Harrison and the dromenon is particularly interesting, since it suggests how myth fits into the relationship between story, memory, and experience. In a discussion of Japanese theatre, Jacinto Z. Augustin states that "from Jane Harrison he [Nishida Kitarō] came to see that myth is grounded in ritual, which in turn grows out of the *dromenon*, the emotionally charged activity of the group, and dramatizes a common hope" (134). Wah picks up on this use of dromenon and places it at the very beginning of story, at the "pre-tell[ing]" of story; dromenon becomes a site of raw creativity, where experience, "the emotionally charged activity of the group," drives the creative process. Moreover, it is important to note another meaning of *dromenon*: a labyrinth, such as were found in many churches (Shafer). This double meaning, then, of a labyrinthine experience lies at the heart of creativity for Wah.

Creativity is so important to Wah because he sees it as a necessary element of subjectivity. For example, in the piece above, the reified elements of story constrain the subjective "I." In the piece that follows it, Wah refines his terms and draws a distinction between body memory and linguistic memory:

> Memory behind the fingers too remember the stove's hot thus numbers right the surplus substance coded as Braille at the tips still a stage further than the mind the dot there but taken in the rush forward literally as revibration spelling sticks in our craw alphabet is all an act but not the one behind memory of the cipher formula if you've never ridden a horse grammar is there for that if you forget hold on (*Music* 9)

Here there is a sense that the body's memory is a matter of instinct, like the memory the drummer uses (piece 2), and it exists outside of language; as such, it would remain unspeakable, unrelateable, and thus completely individual and subjective. Language, however, is a mental construct that "sticks in our craw," and is somehow unnatural to us; the "alphabet is all an act" to us, something that, like story, is removed from true experience. The piece portrays grammar, the codifying element of language, as a kind of safety measure, something that will ensure that we "hold on." Grammar operates in the passage above as a mnemonic device, a set of rules that intrudes between individuals and pure experience by constantly reminding them of the proper way of doing things—metaphorically in this passage grammar works to remind people of the proper way of using language, of ensuring proper communication, which again further distances the individual from actual experience.

The result of this distinction between experience and memory is that Wah describes what he terms "true thought" as thought that works in a creative, combinatory fashion:

> Sentence the true morphology or shape of the mind including a complete thought forever little ridges little rhythms scoping out the total picture as a kind of automatic designing device or checklist anyone I've found in true thought goes for all solution to the end concatenates every component within the lines within the picture as a cry to represent going to it with the definite fascination of a game where the number of possibilities increases progressively with each additional bump Plato thought (*Music* 6)

Wah describes the sentence as a complete thought, something discrete and separate, something unto itself; as an element of language, the sentence works towards compartmentalization. It wants to slot experience into discrete pieces according to a predetermined checklist. However, "true thought" avoids the compartmentalization of the sentence, instead working in to "concatenate[] every component." True thought takes on the aspect of a game, of something that works creatively to combine each element. The result is that true thought avoids reification by avoiding limits: "the number of possibilities increases progressively with each additional bump…," suggesting that each new element that the creative mind encounters requires a complete realignment and reappraisal of every other element that has come before it. The binary that Wah sets here is the difference between the body (experience/becoming) and language (reification/being).

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Tuesday, July 13, 2004

It is possible to view "Music" as an exploration of three primary themes: place, identity, and language. In this sense, Wah's sequence is much more cohesive than a sequence such as Duncan's *Passages*, which is all over the place in terms of subject matter (*Passages* is, in many ways, a poetic diary, which means that Duncan's subjectivity is the only glue holding the disparate pieces together). Because of this coherence, it is possible to think of "Music" as more of a long poem rather than a sequence, as a unified whole rather than a collection of pieces. The result is that one can view "Music" as the outcome of Wah's thinking about place, identity, and language, whereas Duncan's sequence enacts Duncan's thinking about various topics; "Music" is the working through of a particular problem, whereas *Passages* is more thought itself (rambling, unfocused, disconnected, etc.). Compared to Duncan's text, then, I would argue that Wah's sequence is not an improvisation, since it is not composed extempore—there are underlying concerns that each piece addresses and that drive each piece prior to the writing of each piece.

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In "Strangle One," Wah writes that

> To write is to move. Dispersal of a presumed and constructed world. To get back, home (unmarking history so memory can re-cite and re-situate). Then ethnic, earth as ethic (discern literally what's there to stand on, "Back to the land," the communal, intrasubjective blip to resist "America"), then, later, the ethnic (that piss-wall of the racial stained, yet zipped eth-ik forward into and along with newly noted difference).
>
> Yet "$\text{h}_{\text{om}}{}^{\text{om}}\text{e}$" has become also, in its diasporic recitation, a snatch block that nostalgically anchors and commodifies communal and inherited (acclaimed in the "new" world) imaginaries. (18)

In this quotation, Wah places writing (movement) in binary opposition to the idea of home (stasis). Interestingly, he does not align memory with home; instead, memory is that thing which bridges the gap between writing and home—memory is what we use to re-cite and re-situate. Consequently, memory is not necessarily part of the reification process, since we use it as much in writing as in nostalgia (home). Wah also states that "To write in poetry is to move past the comfort of a ruled discourse; in order, to move on, beyond order, the complete thought spills over to an excess and residue of language in which my 'marked body' dissolves into unsure relationships—remarked" (20). Wah, then, aligns language with home/stasis/nostalgia. Writing is about escaping language in order to be able to move, to de-reify the writing subject. I believe that this attempt to escape language manifests itself in "Music" in the attempt to escape the inherited systems of meaning that stifle how we use words in our language. As Wah puts it in "Music" 65,

> Teleological mapping outside the realm of observation architected to the brain the edge of which you get so close to saxaphoning the right gap this spark plug explosion dieseling after the key's turned off invisible eme shapes still hanging around when she says roulette to you what is called meaning on the sound track translated two levels under the lyric Hermes should have said not to steal from yourself yourself. (*Music* 65)

Wah's attempted spontaneity in his writing is the manifestation of his desire to escape language in favour of words. When we encounter a piece like 65, the text urges us to forge our own personal relationship with the meaning of each word, as opposed to relying on the inherited meaning(s) that we normally rely on in day-to-day communication. We are urged to build the meaning of the piece paratactically, word by word, rather than relying on grammar to show us the relationships between the words. The poem becomes, in a way, a map of words that we must individually decipher.

Wah's notion of spontaneity relies on the reader's enforced deciphering of the text, and it shows Wah's interest in Shklovsky's idea of estrangement. Wah quotes from Shklovsky on estrangement in his essay "Strang(l)ed Poetics":

> And art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stony. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects "unfamiliar," to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object; the object is not important. (24)

As I have argued earlier, though, true spontaneity is impossible in writing and/or reading. However, Wah realizes this impossibility, as he is merely trying to use estrangement to allow for a disruptive disjunction in the reader's mind. Wah does not expect to achieve true spontaneity in his writing, but merely wants to maintain the sense of estrangement, and the new perceptions it allows, as long as possible in the reader's mind: "In order to prolong the moment, and the perceptions available in the delay, the movement, the expectation of movement, must be disturbed and fragmented" (30). What this statement means is that language must be made difficult and strange to the reader, in order to force the reader to move past the inherited notions that language seeks to force on us. By making the reader focus on the words (as opposed to the language), Wah attempts to create the moment of estrangement in the reader's mind, where personal perception replaces reified concept, and the reader is able to escape language in her or his own mind. In this sense, what "Music" attempts to do is to slow the movement of the written language, in order to free the reader from his/her relationship to language, thus allowing for personal growth, for a de-reification of the reader's subjectivity—to allow the reader's mind to *move*.

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Thursday, July 15, 2004

Just as Paul Mann warns that there is a danger that the status quo can recuperate experimental writers, there is a similar concern for writers of non-white ethnicity in Canada and the US. Robert Budde, in his article "After Postcolonialism: Migrant Lines and the Politics of Form in Fred Wah, M. Nourbese Philip, and Roy Miki," argues that non-white writers need to be aware that their writing can be used to maintain ethnic boundaries even while the writers themselves attempt to dismantle these same boundaries. Relying heavily on the work of Smaro Kamboureli, Budde states that

> Kamboureli… describes the nation's drive to define ethnicity through a policy which "reifies minorities as that which the cohesive nation is not" (92). This "reification" involves the "'preservation' of ethnicity [and] lodges the ethnic subject within a museum case because of a 'heritage' […] that is presumed to be stable and unambiguous, and therefore easily reproduceable" (106). (285)

This notion that "ethnic" people—which does not include white people, at least not in "white" countries—are somehow static and fixed in their ethnicity, while white people are left unencumbered by their whiteness, echoes Richard Dyer's argument that

> There is no more powerful position than that of being 'just' human. The claim to power is the claim to speak for the commonality of humanity. Raced people can't do that – they can only speak for their race. But non-raced people can, for they do not represent the interests of a race….This assumption that white people are just people, which is not far off saying that whites are people whereas other colours are something else, is endemic to white culture. Some of the sharpest criticism of it has been aimed at those who would think themselves the least racist or white supremacist. bell hooks, for instance, has noted how amazed and angry white liberals become when attention is drawn to their whiteness, when

> they are seen by non-white people as white. (2)

Both Kamboureli and Dyer attempt to point out the implicit, unintentional racism that white culture proliferates in the name of equality, where white people just happen to be more equal than non-whites, especially in the eyes of cultural institutions. Consequently, Budde draws attention to the role of multiculturalism in unwittingly perpetuating this ethnic divide:

> Kamboureli points to another, equally persistent, strategy in Canadian public policy concerning ethnicity—a tendency to erase difference rather than "reify" it. In discussing the Multiculturalism Act, she argues that "this legal document seeks to overcome difference rather than to confront incommensurability. Belying its intent to address systemic inequitites, it executes an emancipatory gesture in the name of homogeneity and unity" (101). This is reminiscent of the claim of a well-known author [Margaret Atwood] that "all Canadians are immigrants"—a gesture than effectively denies the existence of difference and regulates its role in the nation-state. (285-86)

The problem with such a notion of equality is that white people unwittingly but unfairly shape the playing field so that it is biased against non-white people:

> White people have power and believe that they think, feel and act like and for all people; white people, unable to see their particularity, cannot take account of other people's; white people create the dominant images of the world and don't quite see that they thus construct the world in their own image; white people set the standards of humanity by which they are bound to succeed and others bound to fail. (Dyer 9)

Official multiculturalism in Canada, then, is often a force that reifies non-white artists (this force is possibly best seen in the work of Native Canadian artists, whose artwork critics tend to praise most strongly when it is most "Native"—when it is most like the traditional Native artwork from centuries past; in this way, critics constantly (and often unwittingly) pressure Native Canadian artists to reproduce the old, rather than produce the new). The danger for a poet such as Wah, then, is to somehow write in such a manner that critics neither praise nor criticize his work for its "ethnicity." There is a drive to somehow be larger than "just" an ethnic writer. As Budde puts it,

> The central premise of "writing against" the colonial poses the first problem for a critical revisioning; the traditional tendency is to place writers of colour as necessarily "political" and opposed to a central canon or authority—always already outside of power centres. What we are beginning to recognize is the extreme limitations that this margin/mainstream, periphery/centre binary produces for what are simply artists working out of their own cultural and aesthetic context. This fixes the writer of colour into a role of lobby group, special interest group, multicultural constituent, or ethnic representative. Not only does this limit the artist creatively …, but it also relegates the writer to that margin forever, always already outside the canon even if, as is the case of these writers [Wah, Miki, and Philip], they have gained a publication record and readership that clearly places them in the capital "C" canon. One of the dictates of any regime is to effectively evict the writer from the literary "country" and firmly place the writer of colour elsewhere, whether that be a hyphenated margin, a ghettoized reserve, or safely back overseas in the "homeland." (287)

The problem for a non-white writer such as Wah is how to avoid the constrained role of being an "ethnic" writer, and to be recognized as a writer. The danger, then, is that any writer of non-white origins risks being labelled as "ethnic," which, although his or her writing might work to break down such a limited, binary opposition (white/ethnic, central/marginal, etc.) would reaffirm the legitimacy of the category through the writer's supposedly always "raced" subjectivity. If critics label Wah an Asian-Canadian writer, they also reconfirm all of the concepts of a supposedly "unraced" white Canada that that label implies, no matter what Wah says or does in his writing.

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Friday, July 16, 2004

The crux of Budde's argument is that Wah (as do Roy Miki and M. Nourbese

Philip) writes his texts in such a way that they cannot be used to create a monolithic, reified "ethnic" subject. Budde argues that

> The poetics of resistance that these writers [Wah, Miki, and Philip] create, in widely diverse ways, evade placement as "racial" or even "oppositional" and, instead, create writing that is unplaceable, irreducible, and subversive. The tendency of postcolonial theory is to fix in place, totemize, categorize, Folklorama-ize the cultural landscape for the purposes of maintaining, if not Anglo-centric power, then Anglo-centric power positions of knowledge and control. The Ministry of Multiculturalism seems established to disperse money rather than to address the endemic racism that haunts this country. (285)

For Budde, the specific tool that Wah uses to avoid being deemed racial or oppositional is his reliance on indeterminacy:

> [Wah] subscribes to a theory of language that destabilizes all of the efforts of linguistic theory, and sociological study to tame and control its functions. 'Crisis' in meaning, for Wah, is something to celebrate… Wah uses alternative principles in order to construct the text, and making meaning becomes an act that cannot cling to traditional reading habits (including academic ones). (291-92)

My problem with Budde's opinion of Wah's work is not so much that I believe that he is incorrect, but that his argument is correct only so far as it goes. Wah's notions of indeterminacy, ethnicity, and place, for example, are interrelated in a much more complicated way than Budde suggests.

Wah does not view ethnicity as something to be avoided because he does not view it as a place of reified subjectivity (in this sense, Budde seems to be vastly warping Wah's poetics and politics). In his essay "A Poetics of Ethnicity," Wah states that "To write (or live) ethnically is also to write (or live) ethically, in pursuit of right value, right place, right home, right otherness" (58). Wah views ethnicity as a place of moral strength, as a place where the individual can examine and re-examine his/her relationship to the world. In this sense, Wah's notion of ethnicity is not so much an area of limitation, as Budde suggests; instead, Wah calls for everyone to live ethnically/ethically, which means that whiteness must also be viewed as merely one ethnicity among many.

Furthermore, Budde overlooks Wah's notion of "synchronous foreignicity," which I believe lies at the heart of Wah's aesthetics and politics. Wah defines synchronous foreignicity as "the ability to remain within an ambivalence without succumbing to the pull of any single culture (resolution, cadence, closure)" ("Half-Bred Poetics" 83). The term means, then, the ability to remain in a state of equal foreign-ness to all ethnic groups, including the group(s) to which one supposedly "belongs." Perhaps most importantly, Wah suggests that "ethnic" (non-white) and white writers alike can practice synchronous foreignicity. While commenting on the work of Myrna Kostash, Wah states that

> Kostash is indicating the position of applied, chosen, desired, and necessary estrangement that has become a primary unit of composition for many Canadian writers as they seek to deterritorialize inherited literary forms and language, as they seek a heat through fiction. This is a poetics of paradox. We know ourselves by our resistances, a teacher once instructed me.... This principle of synchronous foreignicity..., of embracing antithesis, polarity, confusion, and opposition as the day-to-day household harmony, is a necessary implement in art that looks for new organizing principles, new narratives. ("A Poetics of Ethnicity" 60-61)

While Wah's statement implies that there is a strong tendency towards synchronous foreignicity in "ethnic" writers—probably due to the fact that they are often both part of society and not "really" part of society at the same time—Wah is careful not to limit synchronous foreignicity to any sub-section(s) of society.

Synchronous foreignicity calls for a partial refutation of any group, similar to Robert Duncan's refutation of any group smaller than the totality of humankind. For Wah, though, membership to any group must carry with it a permeable border; it seems that Wah would argue that we are all members of a large number of sub-groups, and it is this over-abundant choice of which group to align yourself with at any one moment that provides the individual with the ability to achieve the distance necessary for synchronous foreignicity. Whereas Robert Budde argues that Wah avoids reification by avoiding membership in a sub-group, the opposite is true: Wah avoids reification by joining a multiplicity of sub-groups, while at the same time refusing to be defined as a member of just one sub-group.

Perhaps most importantly, synchronous foreignicity allows Wah to escape even Budde's well-intentioned but limiting definition. Implicit in Budde's discussion of Wah, Miki, and Philip is an Us/Them mentality, since he deals with only non-white writers, as though the issues he raises are of interest only to "Them." Wah is very careful to expand his notion of synchronous foreignicity beyond merely racial/ethnic borders; he states that "the ethnopoetics tookbox isn't even only 'ethnic,' at least in the sense of racial. These tools are shared by writers who are marginalized, invisible, experimental, political, and in need of any tool that might imagine a culture that could recognize an alien identity and construct a common language of the other" ("A Poetics of Ethnicity" 66). Wah is careful, then, to forge his sub-groups along aesthetic lines as well as racial identities, implying, for instance, that some writers of vastly different ethnicities might at times have more in common with each other through their aesthetic choices than with their own ethnic groups. Wah argues that ethnicity alone does not define a writer's ideology, aesthetics, or personal preferences. This argument views each ethnic group as sufficiently varied; consequently, each group contains differences of opinion and belief, which supports the notion that ethnicities are unfixable/un-reifiable.

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Tuesday, July 20, 2004

One of the most important aspects of "Music" as a series is Wah's refusal to hold true to any one form of poem: punctuated/unpunctuated, prose poem/verse, named/unnamed, short/long, single verse/multi verse, it appears that Wah's sequence is without any reason (there is, however, the occasional rhyme). Rather than looking at the series as an unintentional hodge-podge of whatever comes into the author's mind (which could describe Duncan's *Passages*), I believe that "Music" displays a conscious decision on Wah's part to avoid patterns whenever possible. Consequently, Wah is able to move from a perfectly punctuated prose poem (number eighty), to an unpunctuated free verse poem (number eighty-one), to an unpunctuated prose poem (number eighty-two), to a punctuated free verse poem (number eighty-three), to a series poem (number eighty-four), to an unpunctuated prose poem that attempts to avoid the system of numbering ("Music at the Heart of Thinking Number Whatever"). Moreover, the writing style in each of these pieces is markedly different; for example, there is the rather straightforward lyric style of number eighty "(for Bill Sylvester)":

> Yesterday in Chinatown I bought gai lan seeds.
> Chinese broccoli. The green, crunchy stalks, blanched, and
> ladled over with oyster sauce, make a fine lunch w/ rice,
> maybe some barbecued duck. This morning in my
> daughter's kitchen in Vancouver I think of you and the gai
> lan. The connection isn't my choice; to me, your skin has
> always showed a flush, a quizzical pudeur. Will thought
> forever credit nonsense and the exact measure of our
> hunger and what about our fever? (*Alley* 20)

Here, Wah is at his most conventional: he uses the lyric "I" unproblematically, the setting is domestic, the language is extremely transparent, and the question at the end neatly closes the poem for the reader by attempting to create an epiphanic moment of insight (which provides the slam-the-door-shut ending that is so often found in lyric poems). Furthermore, it is the domestic scene which produces the epiphanic question, which consequently reaffirms the importance of the domestic/mundane moment as a moment allowing personal awareness and insight, which is another major theme of lyric poetry. Finally, the entire poem hinges on a metaphorical connection the poet makes between the mundane (cooking gai lan) and the profound (the connective nature of thought).

Directly following this lyric moment is a piece that works against the lyric. In fact, the most obvious aspect about poem number eighty-one is that language is no longer transparent and trustworthy at all:

> Why then the one whirlpool when all the container
> two leaks depth through its seams splendour
> soaks the sands sprung three as song and not desire
> for the polar axle gravity gave no chance for four
> his meta(m) five outstripped his harrowing death
> lyric left over from six both but let him —
> us who want to be enduring messengers seven will
> so said the wept-for fountain's Lament
> only nine imagined water seeps from the mountainside
> maybe that's why we wait or spring's beach butterfly's
> touch informs new distances yet another story zinging
> motive you and your bike's antennae spanned earth
> but the words all over the edge thirteen taste comes
> thirsty (*Alley* 21)

There is no easy communication here, no reliance on the lyric "I" or on the mundane world at all; instead, language becomes its own world, as it becomes extremely self-referential and difficult to "decode" into meaning. The sequence abruptly pulls the reader from the readerly nature of number eighty into the writerly nature of number eighty-one without any warning or reason. These abrupt shifts leave the reader constantly off-balance (much like the drunken Shao Lin monk Wah refers to in the "Preface" to *Music*).

However, instead of concentrating on this shift's effect on the reader, I would like to focus on Wah's reason for shifting so abruptly. In his essay "Speak My Language: Racing the Lyric Poetic," Wah states that "Since [the early 1980s] the range of political possibility in poetic language has pretty much dwelled between those two poles [those poets who base their work in simple, straightforward common speech and those poets who believe language itself must be interrogated and changed]" (109). This binary definition is by no means an original insight, as most poets and critics today hold it to be a truism. Wah also firmly places himself in the camp of those writers who do not trust the lyric: "I know which one I opt for but I'm always a little bit bothered by those raced writers who go for the other, that seemingly solid lyric subject ground I can't trust. I can't trust it since, for many of my generation, racing the lyric entailed racing against it; erasing it in order to subvert the restrictions of a dominating and centralizing aesthetic" (109). However, Wah goes on to state that younger writers seem to deny a hard distinction between the lyric poem and the experimental poem, choosing instead to write in both styles:

> [Marilyn] Dumont, and others like her, would seem to participate in the use of a derivative formal innovation, not in order to trouble a dominant and inherited structure (social or poetic) but to locate an "ordering intervention" (Clark 25) within a poetic that is intrinsically informative. That is, a racialized lyric, caught in the hinges of inherited poetic forms, might adopt an ambiguous regard to both lyric interference and lyric convention in order to recuperate the agency of linguistic choice. ("Speak My Language" 125)

This comment suggests that Wah, while preferring or "trusting" the experimental style of poetry, can see a particular value to refusing to write in only one camp or the other. Holding up Marilyn Dumont as an example of a younger writer who moves back and forth between conventional and experimental styles, Wah argues that this refusal to belong to only one camp is also a refusal to follow the inherited, expected structure within poetry; in this sense, the divide between the conventional and the experimental camps is itself nothing more than a reified notion, one that people merely accept when they should be examining it. Along these lines, then, readers can view Wah's refusal to adhere to either an experimental or a conventional poetic style in "Music" as an intentional choice to deny the reified, easy distinction between these styles (especially since this distinction carries with it an implicit—and often explicit—opinion that one style is "better" than the other, thus contributing to a fracturing of dialogue between the two camps). In other words, Wah's decision to allow different poetic forms into the "Music" sequence is a conscious choice, a choice intended to allow Wah the most freedom and the least reified authorial subjectivity.

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Thursday, July 22, 2004

There is an oversight in the work of many critics who deal with Wah's work, and it is a oversight hidden by the notion of "Asian-Canadian-ness." Critics often refer to Wah as an "Asian-Canadian" writer; Wah's grandfather was Chinese, after all, and "Wah" is definitely a Chinese name. The problem, however, is that critics seem to erase Wah's Chinese-ness when it comes to his poetry in favour of a vague Asian-ness. This is particularly the case in terms of Wah's use of Japanese verse forms, such as haibuns. Haibuns pop up briefly in "Music": numbers 31, 32, and 33 are all examples of this form. For most critics, the fact that Wah chooses to write in this form is easily explained by his Asian-ness: Pamela Banting, for example, in no way distinguishes between Wah's Chinese ancestry and his use of Japanese verse forms. Referring to Wah's book *Grasp the Sparrow's Tail*, Banting states

> [Wah's] recollected memories of the father are juxtaposed against recurrent "appearance" by Wah's dead father during the son's trip to China and Japan.
>
> *Grasp the Sparrow's Tail* is modelled on the form of the Japanese poetic diary or *utanikki*. The distinguishing marks of the *utanikki*—its blend of poetry and prose, its concern with time, its rejection of the necessity for entries to be daily, and the artistic reconstitution or fictionalization of fact—are all present in Wah's record of his journey to his ancestral homeland. (66)

For Banting, there is a conflation of Japan and China into one entity, as an implicit Asian-ness ties them together in her mind; consequently, not only does she not distinguish between the two countries as Wah's ancestral homeland, but Banting also sees no reason to explain why a Chinese-Canadian writer would adopt Japanese verse forms: the implication is that Asian is Asian.

As Susan Fisher points out, however, Wah's choice to use Japanese verse forms cannot be credited to his ancestral ties to Asia. Although Fisher states that "[Wah's] interest in Japanese poetic traditions derives at least in part from his self-identification as an Asian-Canadian" (95), she goes on to argue that

> Wah's choice of Japanese models is awkward for any theory of ethnopoetics. Whatever aesthetic a Canadian-born person of Chinese ancestry might unconsciously absorb from the conversation of parents or grandparents, it is not a Japanese one. It is possible to argue on historical grounds that because Japanese poetry owes much to Chinese poetry, there is an affinity between these two traditions in East Asian verse, but this argument is uncomfortably close to the view that all Asian cultures are the same. Moreover, the very techniques Wah associates with alienethnic poetics—fragmentation, estrangement, a mixture of genres—are associated with other forms of writing in English, such as postmodernist fiction. (100-01)

It should be remembered that Wah constantly refers indirectly to his Chinese-ancestry in his work (references to tai chi abound in "Music," as do references to the drunken Shao Lin monk on which Wah metaphorically bases the sequence), which serve to point out that he is Chinese-Canadian, not merely Asian-Canadian. Wah's decision to adopt Japanese verse forms is not an attempt to connect with his ancestral past; instead, this decision supports Wah's belief that all marginal writers, not just ethnically marginal writers, share a poetic toolbox:

> The contradictions, paradoxes, and assumptions active at the hyphen, all indicate a position and a process that are central to any poetics of opposition (feminist, sexual, racial) and that is the poetics of the 'trans-,' methods of translation, transference, transition, transposition, or poetics that speaks of the awareness and use of any means of occupying a site that is continually being magnetized. How to pass through without being appropriated. ("Half-Bred Poetics" 90)

The turn to Japan for poetic forms has at least as much to do, Wah implies, with aesthetic sensibility and a feeling of dissatisfaction with dominant North American values as it does with any ethnic ties to the area.

Furthermore, it must be recognized that North American poets with ancestral ties to Asia are by no means the only poets in North America to adopt Japanese verse forms. As Fisher points out,

> [Allen] Ginsberg traces East Asian influences in American poetry to Ezra Pound's axiom, "Direct treatment of the 'thing' whether subjective or objective." …Despite the importance of Asian verse in the modernist revolution, its role was quickly obscured. Its values—brevity, directness, no moralizing or sentimentality, erasure of the speaker's feelings, a reliance on natural images to convey emotion—became naturalized as aspects of modernism. The Japanese verse tradition was more or less forgotten until the 1950s and 60s, when, with the expansion in scholarship on Japan during the Occupation, a new wave of translations became available. Kenneth Rexroth's "hundred poem" collections and Burton Watson's translations of the poetry of Su Tung-p'o and Han Shan attracted a new generation of poets to East Asian verse. Many Beat poets travelled to Japan, primarily because of their interest in Zen Buddhism. Gary Snyder, a scholar and translator of both classical Chinese and Japanese, began to employ haiku and other Asian verse forms in his own poetry…. (99-100)

The lesson to take from this is not to assume that it is Wah's ethnicity that drew him to Japanese verse forms. In a sense, it is possible to see Wah's interest in Japanese forms as a part of the particularly North American counter-culture movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s; Fisher goes so far as to state that "Wah is, in a sense, a northern member of the Beat generation. Like his American counterparts, he was attracted to Japan and its literary traditions as radical alternatives to Western society and poetry" (100).

The assumption that it is Wah's ethnicity that draws him to Japanese forms exposes a form of critical Othering when it comes to writers of non-white ethnicities. The assumption shows that critics set writers like Wah apart from white writers of the same period, believing that their ethnicity is the overwhelming paradigm in all of their relationships with the world of ideas; this assumption, then, limits non-white writers' subjectivity, by necessarily denying them the freedom of choice that is implicitly part and parcel of life as a white person.

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Friday, July 23, 2004

In "One Makes (the) Difference," the poem/manifesto that introduces the "Music" section of *Alley Alley Home Free*, Wah offers the following statements:

> [1] Reading into meaning starts with a questioning glance, a seemingly obvious doubloon on a mast. The multiplicity can be read, should be read, even performed. But then again, perhaps meaning is intransitive and unreadable, only meant to be made. No sooner do we name meaning than it dissipates. As a sure thing, it eludes us. It arouses us to attempt an understanding, to interpret. But this is usually unsatisfying since whatever direction we approach from only leads us to suspect there is no one direction. No single meaning is the right one because no "right ones" stand still long enough to get caught.
>
> [2] But because we do not know does not mean we are lost. Something that is strangely familiar, not quite what we expect, but familiar, is present. That quick little gasp in the daydream, a sudden sigh of recognition, a little sock of baby breath.
>
> [3] Writing into meaning starts at the white page, nothing but intention. This initial blinding clarity needs to be disrupted before we're tricked into settling for a staged and diluted paradigm of the "real," the good old familiar, inherited, understandable, unmistakable lucidity of phrase that feels safe and sure, a simple sentence, just-like-the-last-time-sentence. One makes (the) difference. (5)

Although the above quotations are actually all one continuous passage in the book, I have separated them into three sections because I see three main ideas. 1) Meaning is experiential, not logical, and therefore it is necessarily part of the moment. This notion suggests that meaning changes when the moment changes, that meaning should be conceived as synchronic and never as diachronic. 2) Since meaning is experiential, a piece of writing can never completely escape meaning; a reader will always have her/his personal opinions, beliefs, experiences, assumptions, expectations, etc., (which we could call meaning frameworks) with which to create meaning inside any text. So long as a reader expects to find meaning, meaning will be found. This also implies that all meaning is not only synchronous, but individual, since all readers have different meaning frameworks. 3) The writer's personal intention, the meaning that s/he desires to pass on to the reader, is itself a reified construct, since the meaning frameworks that each person uses to create meaning are constantly under attack from by paradigms that exist outside of the individual. Although our personal frameworks are personal, they are also dependent upon language for their articulation and their maintenance, and since communicative language is by no means synchronic (indeed, communicative language's greatest desire is to be absolutely diachronic), any personal meaning cannot be conveyed to another through communicative language. Consequently, the writer must bypass the rules of communicative language—the sentence, grammar, punctuation, etc.—if s/he is to convey any meaning to the reader. Meaning, a synchronic entity, cannot be transferred to another (or even to oneself) through communicative language, a diachronic entity.

What all of this means is that Wah chooses to bypass the rules of communicative language in an attempt to relate true meaning, synchronous meaning, to the reader. The reader, therefore, must be willing to accept the absence of the rules of communicative language in the poems as an attempt to force the reader to access his/her personal meaning frameworks in an experiential, synchronous fashion. This synchronous meaning cannot be captured by communicative language, which is a translation from experiential meaning to diachronic, reified meaning.

For the critic, these ideas insist that any form of close reading of "Music" (or any other text which attempts to access synchronic meaning in the reader) is nothing more than a translation of the critic's synchronic meaning into diachronic meaning. Once this translation takes place, the poem is in danger of having communicative language rules mapped onto its body. A diachronic reading of "Music" maps the rules of communicative language directly onto the poetry, thereby denying the reader familiar with the diachronic reading access to the synchronic meaning of the piece. The first step in such a translation is always necessarily personal: the critic must convince her/himself not only that a diachronic meaning exists for the synchronic text, but that the diachronic meaning s/he is developing is the *correct* diachronic meaning. Finally, the truly disconcerting element of any diachronic meaning is that such a meaning is fanatical in its belief that it is the only correct meaning; diachronic meanings are, by their very nature, fascistic and evangelical: the stronger, more convincing diachronic meaning will gain mastery over less powerful diachronic meanings until it converts all readers in encounters, and each convert will in turn attempt to expand the support base for the meaning.

For these reasons, critics should avoid close readings, especially of experimental texts. But how is the critic to function, then, if close readings are off limits? My personal attempt to avoid such reifications of the text is to try to place my faith in the fragment. The fragment might not be able to avoid the fascistic drive towards singular, diachronic meaning; I'm hesitant to suggest that the fragment defeats the problem. However, the fragmentary approach to literary scholarship attempts to throw open as many meanings as possible, to create a sort of intellectual battle royale between the ideas it introduces. It is definitely possible that diachronic meaning could still emerge from the fragmentary approach, but the delay that this approach introduces will, I hope, (like Wah's belief in the prolonging effect of poetic estrangement, which is, in its own way an attempt to lengthen the intellectual synchronic moment) make the journey toward diachronic meaning so difficult that some readers will be dissuaded from completing that journey.

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Thursday, July 29, 2004

Although it might not be as obvious as with Cage's or Duncan's writing, anarchy plays a significant secondary role in "Music." Specifically, anarchy comes into play in regards to Wah's preference for discrete separations between objects; anarchy supports the drive to maintain boundaries in "Music." At first, this idea might seem somewhat paradoxical, but, where Cage and Duncan take the boundaries between things to be given and then work towards establishing points of connection or interpenetration between discrete objects, Wah is confronted by what he sees as a world that takes universality as the norm. Consequently, Wah argues that universality must be avoided: "When thinking manoeuvres the horizon by fragment rather than whole, by difference rather than by synthesis, we escape the prison of intention and denouement, of the assumed safety of settlement. This is a moment of friction, in and out of language that ponders the 'door' as a threshold and a site of passage" ("Strangle Six" 185). Wah works at highlighting the separations between things (this is perhaps the major reason why *ostranie*/ estrangement is so important to Wah). One should note that the separations that Wah attempts to re-establish are not absolute, however, since they still allow interpenetration. Wah's anarchy starts from the other side of the divide than does Cage's and Duncan's, but the three poets end up agreeing on most ideas.

I believe that one major aspect that accounts for the anarchist change in focus, from moving past boundaries towards shared connections to moving past shared connections towards boundaries, is the different societies that surrounded the poets. For Cage and Duncan, the world was a divided place; WWII had just finished, the Cold War was at its height, and the gulf between East and West threatened to destroy civilization, first through atomic and then nuclear war. The desire to find commonality makes sense in terms of the fractures of the time. For Wah, however, the world is no longer such a divided field; the Cold War has ended, free trade agreements and economic unions are constantly expanding, and the internet and telecommunications are erasing cultural and physical divides with every passing day. In such a world, where the American monoculture threatens to McDonaldize us all, establishing difference is necessary in order to avoid reification, to allow for the possibility of difference. In fact, Wah explains the importance of establishing differences directly in relation to the economic drive to overcome differences:

> Derrick de Kerckhove, in his book *The Skin of Culture*, offers a … qualification of the first photograph of the Earth: "it expands our perception of our self beyond our own body-image and enlarges our sense of identity. Indeed, from the first moment we see that photograph, we take possession of the Earth and of a new power to invest in it. It is

> an extension of my eyes" (217). It is me! There I am! We are all the same! That's the shape I'm in! This is an investment of identification and identity that commodifies otherness not as excessive and relational but as consumable and narcissistic.... In our desire for technology to metaphorically and literally extend our bodies, ~~we seem~~ to be courting the toxic information of a global market-based economics. Are we not collapsing those very border coordinates necessary for change and movement, exhausting our imaginations in the business of profit...? ("Strangle Seven" 210-11)

The establishment of place, considered more of a given in Cage's and Duncan's work, becomes a major concern for Wah. As he states in his essay "Strangle Six," "But all of it, out there, is measured from in here. In the particularity of a place a writer finds revealed the correspondences of a whole ~~world~~. And then holes in that wor( )d" (187). Place, then, allows the anarchic writer (perhaps due to the vastly different world conditions existing after the mid-1980s I should refer to Wah as a post-anarchic writer) to carve out places of difference in a world attempting to establish an all-consuming reification of culture and people. These differences, in turn, allow both for an awareness of areas of true interpenetration (true "correspondences") as well as for the investigation of language as a tool of reification/commerce/McDonaldization.

In terms of language, Wah's use of anarchy becomes similar to that of Cage and Duncan because Wah focuses directly on the traditional anarchic aspect of interpenetration. For Wah, translation and improvisation become the sites of interpenetration in language:

> The kind of potential that most interests me vis à vis translation, both in literal translation as well as translation as a compositional strategy, is the position and place of active apprehension between the two languages..... I'm thinking of interposition, of an open-ended transcreational process where the "being in-between" (thus, intervention) suspends, as Benjamin Hollander writing about translation suggests, "the double-edged gaze of incitement and citation....."

> That sense of potentiality also exists in improvisation… and its concomitant subversion of the solidity of expectation, and it exists, too, at the interface of a hyphenated (racialized) poetics…. ("Poetics of the Potent" 201-02)

Translation and improvisation open language up to the creative forces that forge the interpenetrative connections that keep reification at bay. Consequently, Wah draws the reader's attention to the fact that many of his texts in "Music" are "improvisations and translations… [of] texts by Steve Rodefer, Gerry Hill, Michel Gay, George Bowering, Robert Kroetsch, Lionel Kearns, Nicole Brossard, Frank Davey, Dave McFadden, Steve McCaffery, Roy Kiyooka, and Phyllis Webb" and that large sections of "Music" take bpNichol's writing as their starting point (*Music* "Preface"). This use of other people's texts as the base text for writing is very similar to Cage's use of Joyce and other authors in his "Writing Through" series, and it shares a great deal with Duncan's use of sustained quotation in his own poetry. Moreover, Wah argues that the post-anarchic writer does not attempt to exert control over her/his writing, but instead concentrates on opening up possibility (this notion of experimentation within language is similar to Cage's creative practices): "Though the poetics of the potent is full of power, that power does not reside in a position of authority and imposition. Rather, the dynamics shift through a range of play and invention in order to continually posit possibility, unpredictability, negative capability, and, dramatically, necessity" ("Poetics of the Potent" 205).

Wah's use of anarchy shows a concern to avoid the reification of subjectivity; this is a concern that lies at the heart of all forms of anarchy. For Cage and Duncan, for example, the concern was to protect the vitality of subjectivity from the reifying effects of over-definition through compartmentalization (this is what "we" are, that is what "they" are). For Wah, on the other hand, the concern is to protect subjectivity from the reifying effects of lack of distinction (we are all the same). Given Wah's concern for the subjectivity of ethnic or racialized groups, as well as the different world in which he lives, his adoption and adaptation of anarchic concerns and methods should surprise no one.

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Friday, July 30, 2004

Smaro Kamboureli, in her article "Faking It: Fred Wah and the Postcolonial Imaginary," offers a perspective on Wah's aesthetics that differs considerably from the post-anarchic reading I offered in yesterday's section. For Kamboureli, who is working from a postcolonial framework, place and boundaries are secondary concerns at best in Wah's aesthetics (in her article, in fact, she does not deal directly with either place or boundaries). However, Kamboureli does place a similar importance on Wah's refusal to remain static in his aesthetics; while I do not pretend to be a postcolonial critic, I find the perspective that Kamboureli brings to Wah's work to be interesting and complementary to the post-anarchic reading I presented earlier. Specifically, Kamboureli focuses on Wah's notion of "faking it," a practice of thinking critically that, although it appears most directly in Wah's critical essays, I would locate in his poetry as well—especially the "Music" sequence, due to its intellectual concerns. In reference to the multiplicity of styles that Wah employs, she argues that

> A reader could easily assume that Wah is a writer who doesn't know what he's doing, who gets excited all too easily, someone who is indeed faking it. But that would be too facile a response. We would be closer to the truth were we to conclude that he's someone who can't stay still—surely a sign of unease—whose sorties against "the boundaries of thinking," against the space of comfort some writers opt to occupy, announce not an ephemeral nature in his thinking but, instead, his belief that "To write (or live) ethnically is also to write (or live) ethically" (58). To accomplish this requires that one adopt an "other-side-of-the-tracks stance," which "is always threatening to the 'other' other-side-of-the-tracks because, at least here in Canada, it is politically and ideologically tied to the redress and rewrite of the apple of John A. MacDonald's eye." (59)

For Kamboureli, the boundaries and sense of place that I see as central to Wah's post-anarchic aesthetics are purely ideological concerns: the boundaries are intellectual in nature, while the sense of place comes from a sense of ethnicity. Kamboureli sees these concerns as more abstract than I do, but she still views them as important. Moreover, where I see the avoidance of reification as a primary concern for Wah, she sees this avoidance as a means to an end: the opening up of areas of discussion that were previously closed to writers of non-white ethnicities:

> For certain kinds of readers, faking it might be termed a poetics of frustration or discomfort because it refrains from offering immediate satisfaction or transparent solutions since, among other things, it works against the teleology of linear logic, or rejected [sic] as a poetics fraught with dangerous excitability, incoherence, "necessary estrangement" (60), and the stain that marks appropriation and trespassing. But no matter what the charges against faking it, it would be hard to argue that it generates a disciplinary discourse, the kind that re-cites the regulatory function of unadulterated historical representation. If anything, its excitability lies in its ability to create a point of entry into spaces some subjects may not be otherwise able to participate in. (120)

Perhaps most interestingly, Kamboureli also zeroes in on the importance of interpenetration in Wah's work; however, she views interpenetration specifically in Benjaminian terms, as being concerned with the trace of history in the text:

> Faking it, then, is a kind of writing whose generativeness must be heard twice over. Faking it, at least as articulated and practiced by Wah, keeps in sight the discursive means that have produced it while, at the same time, heralding a departure from them. Wah does not accomplish this by merely deconstructing the conditions that have made faking it a modality of subjectivity, whereby the subject, after brooding over what has become of it through the vicissitudes of the nation, adopts faking it as a mode of survival or as an emancipatory gesture. Rather, he makes a decisive move against cultural amnesia not by positing cultural memory as a matter of epistemology—what is to be known, what is retrievable—but by invoking the possibility of translation as a praxis understood in

> Benjaminian terms whereby what is remembered is a "'quotation' situated in a new context 'without quotation marks'" (Harootunian 83). This process, which requires a historical consciousness attuned to the contemporaneity of the subject, is, for Wah, a "principle of synchronous foreignicity, … of embracing antithesis, polarity, confusion, and opposition as the day-to-day household harmony, … a necessary implement in art that looks for new organizing principles, new narratives" (2000, 61). In this light, faking it holds the promise—not a messianic promise, I want to stress—to bring about a critique as much of the construction of the nation as of the Enlightenment concept of progress that mobilized some aspects of the nation's foundation in the first place. This implies, in turn, that Wah's poetics of faking it is synonymous with a politics that does not want to overcome the incommensurability of subjectivity, or settle the indissoluble continuum of ideology; rather, it aims at creating an intellectual and cultural space where the critic / writer will not be an agent of the regime of truth but will, instead, engage in the kind of collaborative practice that suggests ways of moving beyond, to borrow William Spanos's words, "the rhetoric of liberation characterizing the discourse of humanism" (1993, 63). (122-23)

What I would just like to point out in all of this is that the fundamentals of interpenetration, translation, and anti-reification, although they are obviously central to anarchy theory are by no means the sole property of anarchy. Furthermore, Kamboureli's article suggests two intriguing possibilities:

- anarchy theory, while no longer considered a major intellectual flashpoint, has managed to get its key points accepted in general by academics who would not consider themselves anarchists;
- the principles of anarchy, although perhaps politically outdated, are proving to be extremely useful to many intellectuals and would perhaps be of direct use to those fields that are concerned with opening up our notions of subjectivity.

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Monday, August 2, 2004

The dangers and the opportunities facing critics who write on Wah's work are both amply illustrated in Robert Budde's article, "After Postcolonialism: Migrant Lines and the Politics of Form in Fred Wah, M. Nourbese Philip, and Roy Miki." The danger and the opportunity, as I see it, are flip sides of the same coin: the openness, the multiplicity, of Wah's writings; the danger is that the critic wittingly or unwittingly lessens this multiplicity by attempting to narrow the "correct" interpretations, while the opportunity is that the critic in no way needs to proceed in such a limiting fashion.

Budde acknowledges the danger of writing on multiphasic texts[67] when he states that "The danger here is that my activity, my postcolonial theorizing, might work directly against the political aims of the writing. My work, however well-intentioned, might contribute to the wider cultural sublimation of these texts" (283). Quite rightly, Budde acknowledges and foregrounds the critic's role in sublimating (or taming, or reifying) Wah's texts. However, merely acknowledging this danger does not mean that Budde can refrain from falling victim to it; for example, note how Budde unwittingly narrows the scope of "Music" in the following passage:

> Wah uses alternative principles in order to construct text, and making meaning becomes an act that cannot cling to traditional reading habits (including academic ones). He borrows from / burrows in jazz, improvisation, and "negative capability and estrangement" (*Music*, "Preface"): "Preact the mind ahead of the writing but stop to think notation of the mind ahead of the writing" (*Music* 2). Besides this free-ranging poetics is a more direct address of identity issues in Canada:

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[67] In his 1969 interview with George Bowering and Robert Hogg, Robert Duncan refers to what he calls the "multiphasic message" of texts:

> And this seems to me the essential thing, that poetry is language that becomes so excited that it is endlessly creative of message. Everything short of that excitement begins to be limited in message, and finally of course people usually like so they "get the message". But in poetry *the* message is endlessly creative of message that you never, in one sense, get it and you always get sent by it. And this is what Charles [Olson] really does. It has to do not with something he hands across, but it has to do with the fact that he writes in such states of excitement, and tuning in that language is functioning here, and is incapable of not producing multiphasic message. (n.p.)

> "Are origins magnetic lines across an ocean / migrations of genetic spumes or holes, dark" (*Waiting* 5). (292)

Budde unintentionally or intentionally limits Wah's writings: in terms of their aesthetics, they eschew "traditional reading habits," in order to focus directly on "identity issues in Canada." Admittedly, part of the problem with this sweeping generalization is that Budde is working transhistorically, reading all of Wah's works as working on the same issues in the same fashion. However, even in "Music" there are texts that do not use improvisation and estrangement in order to avoid traditional reading habits; for example, numbers 16-20 in "Music" not only abandon the prose poem format in favour of traditional free verse, but they also use language in a much more traditional fashion:

a thousand spits
        brittled slantingly

          but the offal

a death machine
of some kind… (*Music* 20)

In terms of its use of language, this poem is less challenging than a poem such as Ezra Pound's "In a station of the metro," and it also shows a great deal of similarity to Pound's use of imagism. Without meaning to disparage this section of five poems (it is not my intention to suggest that there is a difference in quality between this section and the rest of "Music"), it is obvious that Wah treats language much less experimentally in these poems. Furthermore, I can make out no connection between a poem like "20" and Budde's assertion that Wah addresses identity issues in his poems. What I mean to point out by stressing this is that Budde's limitations of Wah's texts not only run counter to the multiphasic nature of the poems, but that whole sections of Wah's writings prove that Budde's limited argument is incorrect.

In opposition to the limited reading that Budde offers above, I would like to put forward a moment where Budde, in the same article, works to stress the multiplicities, the openness, the multiphasic nature of Wah's writing. Towards the end of his article, Budde offers this summation of the works of Wah, M. Mourbese Philip, and Roy Miki:

> These are poetics of resistance, poetics of interference, poetics of improvisation, poetics of colour, poetics of disjunction, poetics of a new way of knowing, antisystemic poetics, poetics of homemaking, poetics of interruption and insurrection, poetics of "non-identity, non-authenticity, impossibility, and corrosiveness" (Kristeva 163), poetics of redress, poetics of feminism, poetics of emancipation, poetics of language entanglement / estangement [sic] / stranglement, poetics of anti-lyricism, poetics of lawlessness, poetics of gift, of use-value, of grace, yes. But do not hold them to it. (293-94)

Here, Budde works as the critic who attempts to "go with" the poets' desire for openness, to "roll with the punches" that the poems offer, so to speak, to the reader who is willing to allow the poems to remain multiphasic. By offering such an over-abundance of definitions, Budde in fact undefines Wah's and the others' poetics. Budde hints at a multiphasic criticism, one that will not seek to find the correct reading of an open text, but will instead be satisfied with suggesting multiple possible readings of such a text.

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Tuesday, August 3, 2004

One of the most important structural elements of "Music" is the central role given to the unpunctuated prose poem. This lack of punctuation flows directly out of Wah's dissatisfaction with the sentence as a unit of speech that has become, almost insidiously in Wah's opinion, a unit of thought. As he says in "Strangle Four," "In most writing the plan is the sentence that intends to complete thought. This is a simple sentence. Period. But if it can't move perception outside of its own logic, then the writer is robbed of other possibilities" (107). The sentence operates as a tool of reification: we think in sentences; we expect others to think in sentences. Consequently, in a poem such as "Music Seventy-Nine," the lack of punctuation denies the firm existence of the sentence as a unit of thought:

> Thought knot genetic still associational tri-partite basic relations as in microlinguistic BU BR and BS as Duncan pointed out through HD Schrödinger grew crystal eyes for the multiple yet maybe the whole chromosome fibre an aperiodic solid this movement no net or labyrinth Tisserande's body enclosed within the stars as clues that's all we have this encyclopaediatic devotion to system woven codes of straight desire not thread as a guaranteed familiarity to pluck further prehension from the raven/magpie bridge but as Jake says in Feathers to Iron not her epiphany because it has moved on and you must do likewise simply to keep up (with her). (*Alley* 18)

By rushing words together, with images and phrases added paratactically, Wah's aesthetics mirrors that of John Cage's anarchy-based aesthetics. Cage, of course, also distrusted the sentence as a reified unit of thought: "Due to N. O. Brown's remark that syntax is the arrangement of the army, and Thoreau's that when he heard a sentence he heard feet marching, I became devoted to nonsyntactical 'demilitarized' language ("Writing…" 133). However, where Cage decided to use punctuation marks as art, strewn on the page in chance-based patterns, Wah often avoids punctuation altogether in large sections of "Music." Moreover, Wah's avoidance of the sentence is generally more thoughtful than Cage's. For example, Wah responds openly to Ron Silliman's call for poetry to embrace the "new" sentence (sentences joined together paratactically). For Wah, the connection between the sentence and reified thinking extends beyond any attempt to resuscitate the sentence merely by relying on parataxis:

> I think what I've always resisted about Ron's call to the "new" sentence is that it is still the *sentence* that is posited as an hierarchic morphemic value. I understand Ron's description (and his essay on "The New Sentence" is immensely useful), but the focus on the "sentence level" of language provokes resistance in me as one of those culturally inherited, grammatically dominant concepts that somehow remain in control of our

> thinking. ("Dear Hank" 225)

Still, in keeping with Wah's attempt to cross any boundary, including his personal distaste for the sentence, he admits that the new sentence offers a useful departure from accepted thinking:
"Having said that, I'm also very attracted, compositionally, to what the 'new' sentence can do in a dynamic of juxtaposition" (228). In this sense, Silliman's new sentence occupies a sort of middle ground between the traditional sentence and Wah's de-sentenced prose poems (this isn't surprising, considering the paratactical nature of Wah's prose poems).

Wah's attempt to avoid the sentence may seem, at first, to contradict my earlier assertion that Wah is concerned with creating boundaries in a world that is trying to remove boundaries; after all, the sentence is the most-used boundary in the English language, and by removing the sentence, Wah's prose poems become a rather undifferentiated mass of words. To an extent, this point has merit; however, on a deeper level, what I see happening in the de-sentenced prose poems is an attempt to refocus the reader's attention to the individual words themselves, which would re-establish a permeable boundary between the basic elements of signifying meaning in the English language. Wah himself posits what he calls a "molecular poetics":

> A "Molecular Poetics" would be, then, a set of tools in writing that amplify the minute and particular, the discernment of cells in composition that indicate a potential for presence, residue, evidence.... [N]ow we know we're reading *writing*, writing (as opposed to some confessional realism) because its language is in pieces.... Histology, the study of (word) cells. The *punctum*, the beat, the gap, the gasp, the pulp, the pulse, the sigh, the sign. ("Loose Change" 238)

For Wah the avoidance of the sentence is an attempt to refocus attention back on the word, that level of language which people usually overlook in favour of the combinatory gesture of the sentence. A de-sentenced prose poem prods the reader to engage with each word as a unit in and of itself; only after dealing with the word level of the poem can any attempt at combination between words be tried. Furthermore, the reader is free (to some extent, at least) to choose which combinations to create: what words will go together to form word strings (units of meaning roughly similar to phrases) is left up to the reader, since punctuation marks are not there to enforce the writer's word combinations. The result is that different readers will almost definitely end up with different word strings, resulting in different meanings emerging between readers. More importantly, though, is the fact that the same reader might, intentionally or not, create different word strings when he or she re-reads the same poem; this results in a very high likelihood that the de-sentenced prose poems avoid reification as much as possible for any text that is written in permanent ink on a fixed receptacle.

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Thursday, August 5, 2004

In his article "Rhetoric and Poetry and Fred Wah," Ed Dyck has many useful, insightful things to say about Wah's work, especially the "Music" sequence. However, what particularly concerns me about his article is a rigidity in Dyck's thinking that I do not think is appropriate to apply to Wah's works. Two examples stand out from Dyck's essay:

> So paradox hovers wherever there is a binary of the form B/not-b. Consider the following poems from *MHT* (italics added):
>
> Don't *think thinking* without *heart* (#1)
>
> *think* notation *of the mind* ahead of the writing (#2)
>
> once *thinking as feeling thought*
> then becomes simple and there
> *crows fly in no pattern*
> through the fir and spruce… (from "Another MHT")
>
> The first ten pages of the book are full of paradoxes: mind and body, stop and go, past and present, before and during and after. Each paradox,

> felt if not consciously recognized as such, contributes to the poems' effect on the reader, an effect of dislocation leading to undecidability. What keeps the lot (and the reader) from flying apart is that rhythm itself is preferred as the resolution of the paradox. (199-200)

> [T]he reader presupposed by and figured in these [Wah's] poems is one who will be persuaded by the ethos represented in the text. If the narrator's use of [э] to represent himself leaves you cold, you won't like *Breathin' My Name with a Sigh*; if the narrator's "doing the horse" while *Waiting for Saskatchewan* seems irrelevant, you will dismount; if the musical signature and the citation of community (other authors, other texts) in the preface and poems of *Music at the Heart of Thinking* excludes you too emphatically, you won't enjoy the poems' tumbles. You won't, in short, be persuaded by what the poems say or by my admittedly rhetorical argument. (201)

The first example focuses on the role of paradox in "Music"; however, are the examples Dyck offers truly paradoxical? To say that thinking must include the emotions ("Don't *think thinking* without *heart*," Dyck's emphasis) could only be considered paradoxical if the reader is inclined to see thought and emotion as two completely separate spheres; apparently Dyck sees them in this fashion, but there's no reason for him to assume that anyone (let alone everyone) else agrees with him on this point. It is the implied universality of Dyck's thoughts that annoy me; he is, after all, offering an interpretation of Wah's poems, but, for some reason, he wants to offer the definitive interpretation: thought and emotion must be separate, therefore they are paradoxical. Moreover, even if one were to grant Dyck's opinion and agree that paradoxes abound in "Music," there is no reason to suggest that "Music" itself views paradox in the same fashion that Dyck does. For Dyck, paradox results in undecidability; however, the speaker in "Music" does not seem to agree with this result: for the speaker, paradox seems to be something that must be accepted as a new formulation, as a formulation that breaks down the old binaries. Consequently, "Music at the Heart of Thinking" is not about the paradox of combining music, emotion, and thought; instead, it is about the possibility of combining these three elements into one new element. Dyck sees paradox as setting up a blockage, which forces the reader outside of the content of the poems; the poems become almost nonsensical in his opinion, and it is only through a reliance on rhythm that they maintain any sense of wholeness. I, on the other hand, think that the reader can view paradox in "Music" as an attempt by Wah to deny the traditional binary system of thought, because paradox offers a both/and view as opposed to an either/or view. In my opinion, Dyck believes in the binary oppositions and can't move past them; that's why he views paradox in such a limited, rigid fashion.

If the first example betrays Dyck's rigidity in relation to the poetry, the second example reveals a similar rigidity in relation to subjectivity. Here again, Dyck falls back on a strict either/or formulation: a reader is either with Wah, or s/he is against Wah. More importantly, Dyck argues that the boundary line between these two positions is absolutely fixed and in place prior to the reader encountering Wah's poetry. How can such a rigid position be reconciled with a poet such as Wah, who believes in the *process* of poetry, of subjectivity, of place, etc.? Implicit in Dyck's formulation is a belief that a reading subject can never change; yet Wah, as a process poet, seeks to write poetry that engages the reader in the process. For Wah, the notion of engaging a reader in the process of change is the primary goal; consequently, the implied goal would be to change the reader through having her/him read a sequence such as "Music." Fundamentally, the problem with Dyck's rigidity is that there is no room for the possibility that a reader could *learn* from Wah's writing: learn to view the world differently, learn to view flux differently, learn to view *poetry* itself differently. In this sense, Dyck unwittingly removes himself from the process Wah attempts to create, since Dyck refuses to admit that flux/jazz/change can ever be truly enacted; by refusing to engage with the text in good faith (a reader offers this good faith by being willing to entertain a text's fundamental principles with an open mind), Dyck reveals himself to be the limited, uncharitable reader that he describes in the second example.

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A Brief Coda

Tuesday, March 22, 2005

In retrospect, and after meeting with my supervisory committee, it seems a bit unfair to Ed Dyck to end my project by focussing on what I see as his shortcomings. As a way to at least slightly move beyond that, then, I'd like to quickly discuss my current opinion of the type of academic writing I've practiced (and, to a degree, preached) for the better part of several years now.

I still firmly believe in the usefulness of process-based academic writing, especially when dealing with process-based texts such as the six I've focused on in this study. (I also still firmly believe that severely fixed, static critical discussions of these types of texts, such as the kind Ed Dyck offers, are compromised at best—but I'm getting negative again.)

One way that my thinking has changed, I think, from when I originally envisioned my project, is that I'm at least a little bit more humble and conciliatory. Humble in that I don't think I've reinvented the wheel; conciliatory in that I see a lot more room for different types of criticism on these texts than before. Specifically, while working through my ideas on the reification and recuperation of indeterminate texts and the roles critics play in that process, I'm more certain than ever that merely discussing a text is an integral part of recuperating that text. Even more so, I'm convinced that discussing a text is the most integral part of the recuperation process.

The good news—and I think this just *might* be good news—is that my opinions towards recuperation have also softened; my opinions aren't quite as black and white as they were before working through my dissertation. Recuperation is still not something I openly welcome, but I am willing to admit that it might be a necessary evil; in order to change things, it is quite possible that the challenges themselves might need to be open to change, perhaps even—*shudder*—compromise.[68] For this reason, I'm willing to remain open to the idea that it might be more important to have people discussing indeterminate poetry, and thereby keep it in the cultural conversation, than it is to police who should say what about indeterminate poetry.

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[68] There is at least one other factor to consider: I am staring at the remote possibility of actually becoming a *professional* academic in the distant or possibly remote future. Unpleasant as it might be to admit, it's definitely possible my attitudes have changed due to the gravitational pull of a… "paycheque," I believe is the word the kids use these days.

So, I'll shake hands with Ed Dyck, and we'll both be on our way.

* * *

Tuesday, March 29, 2005: A Brief Re-ignition

After my comments offering a certain amount of reconciliation with conservative scholars, it would seem to be a bit of bad faith to recant… but, in my defence, my comments from last week were written before I read Camille Paglia's article "Rhyme and Reason," which has once again re-ignited my distrust of those scholars who feel the need to find The Meaning of a piece of poetry.

Paglia's article "is an edited version of the introduction to 'Break, Blow, Burn: Camille Paglia Reads Forty-Three of the World's Best Poems,' published by Pantheon Books" ("Rhyme and Reason"). I include the publisher's name because, as a piece of popular scholarship, Paglia's book is aimed at non-scholars—which is fine, of course… or it would be, if Paglia didn't see it to be her job to teach these interested non-scholars how to read—which really means how to read properly—which really, truly, means how to read like Paglia.

Paglia takes a populist, anti-intellectual approach in her article, stating that

> Poststructuralism and crusading identity politics led to the gradual sinking in reputation of the premiere literature departments, so that by the turn of the millennium they were no longer seen, even by the undergraduates themselves, to be where the excitement was on campus. One result of this triumph of ideology over art is that, on the basis of their publications, few literature professors know how to 'read' any more – and thus can scarcely be trusted to teach that skill to their students.

It's not so much that I disagree with Paglia's belief in the declining poetic literacy of the average university English professor (though, really, what does it mean to say poetic literacy has dropped? Isn't that just a way of saying people don't read poems the way *I* want them to?) that I take offence with so much as Paglia's firm belief that she has come along just in time to show us all how to read poetry properly again. And what does Paglia mean by "reading"? She means a good, old-fashioned new criticism: "In my new book, Break, Blow, Burn, I offer line-by-line close readings of 43 poems, from canonical Renaissance verse to Joni Mitchell's Woodstock, which became an anthem for my conflicted generation." In other words, Paglia's type of reading holds the key to all lyric poetry, regardless of the time or place of its composition, and it is a style of reading that eschews a writerly response by the reader; she ends her article by stating that

> My advice to the reader approaching a poem is to make the mind still and blank. Let the poem speak. This charged quiet mimics the blank space ringing the printed poem, the nothing out of which something takes shape. Many critics counsel memorising poetry, but that has never been my habit. To commit a poem to memory is to make the act of reading superfluous. But I believe in immersion in and saturation by the poem, so that the next time we meet it, we have the thrill of recognition.

Now, I happen to agree that memorizing a poem isn't the most productive habit a reader can take on, but my problem with Paglia here is that she promotes the text over the reader, implicitly arguing that meaning comes from the printed word and not at all from the encountering mind. Furthermore, this stance reifies meaning; the poem, for Paglia, means exactly what the author wanted it to mean, not what the reader can get out of it. The meaning is fixed, static, and dead.

To be honest, Paglia is a bit of an easy target. And, to be fair, she's at least trying to get people to read poetry; however, it's the desire to shape exactly how people should read poetry that bothers me. In the end, I think Paglia is an excellent example of the type of academic critic that my project was designed to work against. The fact that her book has just recently been published shows that conservative criticism is still out there, and that it is still something that needs to be counterbalanced.

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